

The 40th Bomb Group was sending all available combat B-29s from their Indian base at Chakulia to the forward base at Hsinching, China, at the end of July 1944 in order to run the 20th Air Force fourth bombing mission to the SHOWA STEEL WORKS at Anshan, Manchuria. Gen Henry H. "HAP" Arnold was very anxious to show the world what strategic bombing the B-29s could do with the Norden bombsight on Japanese steel targets as the first three missions to Bangkok, Yawata, and Omura had been less than successful. The B-29s were still having problems flying in the CBI theatre due to primitive bases, maintenance, and untrained flight crews. The new Wright 3350 engines were the main source of problems with failures due to fires, broken valves, high temperatures on gauges due to poor cooling system in the tropical heat. We had some problems with the gasoline which was pumped to the B-29 bases from Calcutta. Water sometimes was found in our tanks. The fact that the B-29s were constantly being used to haul gas, oil, and other supplies over the HUMP to China was a major cause of inadequate maintenance.

Unexpected events happened to the still new and unproven Superfortress which caused crashes and loss of life for the crews on the other side of the world. Such was the case with Capt Alvin Hills and crew. Alvin Hills had joined the 40th Bomb Group as a co-pilot in 1942 after graduation from the Aviation Cadets. Like many others, he had probably learned to fly in the Civilian Pilot Training program (CPT) when he was taking his mandatory first two years of college. He had flown the twin-engine B-18s on the Anti-submarine patrols around the Panama Canal area in its defense by the Army Air Corps. Early in 1943, the 40th Group gained 4-engine experience flying B-17s and B-24s as they replaced the slow, lumbering B-18s. In June 1943, the 40th Group was released from the patrol duty to return to the States to be the first to fly and train in the new B-29s. The new Boeing factory at Wichita Kansas was building and assembling the new planes with untrained workers so that each of the early planes were different from each other due to the many changes as production advanced. Each plane had to go to modification centers for changes.

The 40th Group in its patrol duty consisted of four squadrons; the 25th, 44th, 45th, and 395th. When they reached Pratt, Kansas, the Group was split equally in two with personnel in the 25th and 395th being sent to form the new 462nd Group at another new base at nearby Victoria, Kansas. Some men from the 44th and 45th squadrons joined with new men from combat duty in Europe or the South Pacific, the Training Command, and transfers from other flying commands to rebuild and fill up the empty 25th & 395th Squadrons. Two other new Very Heavy Bomb Groups were also added, the 444th and 468th, in similar fashion to form the 58th Bomb Wing. Everyone wanted to be amongst the first to fly the new Superfortress, so final crews were selected and some qualified people were sent to New Mexico and Texas bases to start forming the new 73rd Bomb Wing and future B-29 Wings.

Lt. Hills started in the B-29s as a co-pilot as did Walter Ball, Jim Cowden, George Lowry, John Martin, and others from the 40th-BG along with new graduates from 4-engine training schools. The 40th Group squadrons each had 15 crews, but only received nine combat B-29s to take overseas in March 1944. Production of the new bombers had lagged causing delays meeting Pres Franklin Roosevelt's promises to Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Chiang Kai Shek, and Joseph Stalin (the other Allies Leaders) that the United States would have B-29s bombing the Japanese

by spring of 1944. It had earlier been decided that the new superships would not be needed in the European War against the German Nazi "Axis" as the B17s, B-24s and other planes were making good progress at that time. Since only nine crews would fly the B-29s to Asia, the six remaining crews in each squadron were sent to the CBI by ship and ATC routes.. Thus the flying crews gained at least a crucial 100 hours of flight time in the B-29s over the "second team" men.

Most B-29s arrived at the rebuilt British bases near Calcutta in April 1944. Maintenance people had arrived by boat from both Atlantic and Pacific routes to avoid submarine attacks. However, the maintenance would suffer because one shipment of tools and equipment was lost enroute. The weather, along with poor food and living conditions, handicapped repair and replacement work in the CBI area along the equator. It took over a week to fly and rush material from the States and over a month by boat. We lived in tents under the wings of the planes until the airfields in India could be improved during the spring by bringing black engineer troops from work on the Ledo Road which was to replace the old Burma Road which the Japanese had taken early in WW-II.

By May B-29s had started flying over the Hump to new bases in the Chengtu Valley of western China, north of Chungking and Kunming where Gen Chennault and his Flying Tigers were defending the area. The Chinese had built their fields around Chengtu by peasants doing hand labor since there was no modern mechanical equipment available. Those unpaved runways did allow the B-29s to fly their early missions against Japanese targets in occupied China, Manchuria, and even Kyushu Island and Formosa. Alvin Hills and his crew shared #291 with Capt Richard McGlenn who had flown #291 to India. As time went along, he also flew other combat B-29s which had been converted into "tankers" to haul gas and supplies to China. It took six HUMP trips to get enough supplies to the advance China bases to fly one combat mission from those isolated places. Those flights were dangerous with bad weather and no maps to use.

Alvin Hills, along with most B-29 crew members, received a promotion about July 1, 1944. It had been noticed when the first missions were flown that the 40th Group was behind the other groups in the ranks of their personnel. The Pilot or Airplane Commander was supposed to be a Captain. The trip to China in #291 was the crew's first combat mission, so they were anxious to make a dent in the Japanese war operations. The following information is from 40th BG and 395th BS Histories for July 1944 and recollections by former friends:

" In accordance with FO#4, XX Bomber Command, dtd 18 Jul 44, the 40th Bomb Gp began dispatching B-29 aircraft from rear to forward area on 25 Jul 44. On 25 Jul 44 eight (8) aircraft arrived A-1, on 26 Jul 44 thirteen (13) aircraft arrived, on 27 Jul 44 three (3) aircraft arrived and on 28 Jul 44 three aircraft arrived. As of 28 Jul 44, there was a total of twenty-seven (27) aircraft at A-1. Of these one (1) #288, was a special photo ship. On 26 Jul 44 enroute to forward area one (1) aircraft, #291, crashed near MIDNAPORE shortly after take-off for A-1."

"There was a meeting of all Pilots in the War Room on July 17 with Group Operations Officer. He explained the new route we were going to take over the Hump and gave us a little "dope" on the coming mission. The Group Bombardier explained to us the new system which shall be used

to salvo the bombs and forward bomb bay tank on take-off if it becomes necessary. The Group Radar Officer showed us Radar pictures which were taken on the recent bombings of Japan. Then there were similar meetings in the War Room for Engineers, Co-pilots, Navigators, Bombardiers, and Radar Operators.

A new guard system has been instigated whereby only one entire crew stands guard for the night with airplane commander acting as duty officer. From 1800 until 06:00 a crew is assigned guard duty with half of the men guarding from 1800 until 02:00 then being relieved by the other half until 06:00 when the crew assigned to the plane takes over the responsibility of guard.

The Squadron has received three new planes this month: 224466 (Woolsey), 26363 (Varoff), and #426425 (Schaal), which were immediately assigned crews. Scarcely a plane in our Squadron has escaped an engine change at some time during this month—only three still have their engines intact. The high daily temperatures and Monsoons limited mechanical daytime work.

All combat planes were called off flying status 20 July so that ground checks and maintenance could be accomplished before the coming raid. Both mechanics and crews are really buzzing around all during the day and night getting things “tuned up”. You can’t blame them as this is the so-called “second teamers” first opportunity to have a smack at the Japs.

Both general and individual briefing was held in the War Room on 24 July for Pilots, Co-Pilots, Navigators, Radio and Radar Operators, and Bombardiers. All important information except final weather briefing and last minute “poop” was exhibited to the above crew members during this session. Our mission was to be a daylight four plane element formation – maximum performance.

Planes from the 25th and 44th Squadrons took off on the 25th of July, right in the midst of very inclement weather – low ceiling, poor visibility and even drizzle, but they all made it with no difficulty. On the 26th of July eight of our planes as well as the 45th planes and stragglers from the other two squadrons took off for the forward area.

One ship got about 25 minutes out from the field when they noticed oil streaming from the bottom of the nacelle of the #1 engine. The oil got so low that it became necessary to feather the engine and return to the field. They landed on three engines with 127,000 lbs, but experienced no great difficulty. Upon investigation, it was found that someone failed to safety the oil sump plug, so they corrected the discrepancy, refilled the tank, and taxied out to take off again. #3 cut out on one magneto, so they had to return to the line again for more maintenance.

Another ship had gotten as far as Imphal when #1 engine caught on fire. He immediately feathered it, dropped his bombs and returned to the base. The hose clamp on the C-4 strainer had not been tight enough. It slipped off causing gas to waste on the hot engine which caught fire and burned holes in the top cowling.

Capt Alvin E. Hills, Jr. and his crew in B-29 #426291, took off, and were forced to crash land somewhere in the vicinity of Kharagpur after approximately 30 minutes of flight. Following is a list of the crew and their status together with statement of the accident by Capt. Hills.

Capt Hills, Alvin E. Jr.	P	Minor injuries
1/Lt Houston, William G	CP	Fatal (died in hosp on 26 th)
1/Lt Wortman, Wilbur C.	N	Fatal
2/Lt DiLollo, Roger C	B	Fatal (died in hosp Aug 1 st)
F/O Gaver, Irvin E.	FE	Fatal
Sgt Pierce, Jess H.	R	Fatal
S/Sgt Dignan, James C.	SG	Fatal
Sgt Smith, Theodore R.	RG	Fatal
T/Sgt Dirkinsha, George W.	LG	Fatal
Sgt Teter, Roy L.	TG	Minor injuries
Sgt Harmon, James W.	V	Minor injuries (V was Radar)
Sgt Polonsky, Samuel N.	V	Minor injuries
T/Sgt Cole, Lawrence M.	CC	Fatal

STATEMENT OF CAPT ALVIN E. HILLS, JR. AIRPLANE COMMANDER #426291
As told to Major R. M. McGlinn, Accident Officer

"We took-off from Chakulia, India, at 07:35 IST, climbed on a course of 72` for 5 to 10 minutes and then changed course to 84` continuing our climb until reaching an altitude of 1,000 feet. The flight engineer advised #2 Cylinder head temperature was reading 270 and advised leveling off for cooling. We flew for approximately ten minutes in level flight when Co-Pilot noticed #3 engine on fire. I feathered #3, advised the flight engineer to cut #3 fuel shut-off valve off, and use the fire extinguisher. The use of the fire extinguisher showed no help what-so-ever. I started a slow turn to the left and after 10 or 15 degrees were accomplished, #2 engine started to cut out, dropping from 2400 to 2000 back to 2400 and then 1500 RPM. I advised the Bombardier to salvo the bombs and forward bomb bay tank. (The Bombardier had a little trouble operating the salvo mechanism.)

The Co-Pilot advised crew members, over the interphone, to prepare for an emergency landing. I did not try to feather #2 engine, (I believe the Co-Pilot in the confusion tried to unfeather #3 as there was a terrific drag on that side.) A moment later, #1 and #4 engines began cutting out. I could not maintain level flight, dropped the nose to pick up air speed and broke through the clouds at approximately 100 feet and found a clear area. I made a normal approach for a normal belly landing. Just before contact, I notified the flight engineer to cut the switches. Normal contact was made with the ground at about the radar section, and an explosion occurred on the right side. We slid along the ground for quite a distance and then came to a sudden stop. By this time, the entire cabin of the plane was filled with flame. I proceeded through the Pilot's window to safety. I then helped Lt Houston, the co-pilot, out to the bank of a creek, away from the flames. Lt. DiLollo was dazed and was walking around in front and to the left of the front.

IAS at level flight was 198 MPH
IAS after losing both engines was 130 to 145 MPH
IAS through clouds to about contact with the ground was 160 MPH
Landing time was approximately 0755 IST

(End of Statement)”

Notes from Harry Changnon, 40th-BG Historian on April 27, 2002:

Except for the crash of Capt Hills and crew in #291, July 1944 in India was much better for members of the 40th BG. Let me quote from the Microfilm copy of the Group's Historical report: Most men were pleased to be promoted a grade as we had heard from the start of the B-29 program a year ago in July 1943 that we were special people and had been selected from the many training fields, schools, and previous records over others who applied. It was galling to find that some other B-29 Groups (444th) had already made their promotions before leaving the States. Those of us who arrived before and with the B-29s in March and April had suffered from the poor living conditions of living in tents on cots without electricity, no refrigeration, poor food available, oppressive heat, few tools or equipment to use and constant shortage of replacement parts. There was no PX or supplies normally available from that source, and worst of all was the lack of mail from home and censorship of our own mail. There were some old bashes located about five miles away, but no transportation to go back and forth. That was "The Old Area"

"July was a period of moving and readjustment for the 40th Group. Only two scheduled raids were run; First was a small harrasing and reconaisance raid on the Japanese Island of KYUSHU, which took place on night of July 7th and second, the maximum strike on the SHOWA STEEL WORKS at ANSHAN, MANCHURIA which was successfully carried out on July 29th when four plane formations were able to use the bombsight for the first time. We could brag about damage!

Many changes took place in arrangement of Chakulia Air Base as the new "E" Building opened alongside the North-South runway. New concrete taxiways and "dough nut" parking areas were completed and aircraft were moved to their new stations from their temporary location on the hard-stands alongside the North-South runway. Immediately that runway was resurfaced with concrete and replaced the East-West runway for most takeoffs and landings, due to its better surface and that prevailing winds came out of the south.

The new group housing area was completed and personnel moved into the new area which was located within a mile of the N-S runway. Maintenance squadrons only had to move across the street for a welcome move. The new quarters were in permanent buildings with thatched roofs and mud walls (almost like concrete) which were whitewashed on the inside and with concrete floors. Wide porches extended along the front of each building. Latrines and shower buildings were conveniently placed to the rear of the areas. Each Squadron and Group Headquarters had new kitchens adjoining mess halls. New movie houses, E-M and Officer Clubs opened.

The move to permanent quarters came none too soon for the Indian Monsoons were underway. Almost 20 inches of rain fell during the month of July. It wasn't too bad, but some jeeps were stuck in the mud almost to their tops. The approach to the "E" Building was series of jumps from one floating plank to another. The roof leaked every few feet so that often men could be seen working at their desks in rooms where showers were falling around them. In heavy downfalls, the floor in the statistical section would be covered by over two inches of water. Everyone did feel better for the Monsoon season brought an end to the searing heat of the three previous months. No longer would temperatures run up to 130` on the line and average temps at over 100` in the shade. Despite showers, local flying conditions were satisfactory and only twice was field closed."

Earlier we mentioned "The Old Area" and now that we had a "new Living Area", we could tell newcomers that conditions were not too bad, they should have seen the "Old Area". It reminded us new B-29ers at Pratt, KS, that we soon got awfully tired about hearing how tuff it was to serve in the 40th "on the Rock" or Galapagos Islands on Patrol Duty for the Panama Canal. As time went along, new replacements on Tinian were tired hearing about the miserable CBI duty. Later when the 40th BG relocated at March Field or Davis Monthan, we told new men they should have served with us overseas. Only the guys who started out in tents in Puerto Rico could stop us.

Now let us return to Alvin Hills after his tragic accident. He was so remorseful about losing most of his crew that he had known for almost a year. He thought so often how he might have been able to have landed the stricken plane with less damage and death. We pilots would try to console him by saying that in that emergency he didn't have time or conditions to react differently. Alvin, or "Bumpy" as many of us called him lost his confidence. He felt badly that he still lived and nine men had died because he may have mishandled the plane or landing. He definitely didn't want to be the Aircraft Commander anymore. After a couple months and the deactivation of the 395th Sqdn, he was transferred (with 26 Offs & 33 EM) as CP for Maj Ira Matthews in the famous "EDDIE ALLEN" after his original B-29 CP, Lt Bob Winters took over the old Landreth crew. Later Glenn Landreth, rejoined the 45th BS after spending most of 1944 in hospitals with his stomach ulcers. It turned out to be a good deal for both officers. In fact they were soon flying missions as a Lead Crew and were sent back to the States June 12th, 1945 to Muroc Training Center for more instruction as leaders.

"Bumpy" Hills flew with L/Col Oscar Schaaf in Oct & Nov 1944 locally & on couple missions. He then was CP for Maj Ira Matthews on 11-21-44 in #579 to Omura for 16-hrs; on 12-7-44 in #579 to Mukden for 13-hrs; on 1-6-45 to Omura in #798 for 14-hrs; on 1-10-45 in #798 to Keelung, Formosa for 11-hrs; on 1-13-45 in #798 to Kagi, Form. 11-hrs; on 1-16-45 in #579 to Shinchiku, Form for 11-hrs; on 2-01-45 in #579 to Singapore for 17-hrs; on 2-7-45 in #579 for 10-1/2-hrs to Bangkok; on 2-20-45 (when Matty & crew went to USA he was with Landreth) in #274 to Singapore for 17-hrs (& joined by Dick Steiner as Nav & has pix); On 2-24-45 in #555 to Singapore for 17-hrs; he flew to Tinian 4-21-45 in #555 for 16-hrs; they missed 1st two msn, but on 5-14-45 to No. Nagoya in #555 for 17-hrs; on 5-25-45 to Tokyo in #555 for 15-hrs; on 6-1-45 they transferred to Muroc Air Base for Lead Crew School & went by ATC to States. Hills & Glen Landreth never returned to the 40th.BG. George Williamson did & was killed on POW msn 8/30/45