

After the Japanese surrender in September, 1945, General Curtis Lemay selected a crew of 40th Bombardment Group (VH) combat veterans to attempt the first non-stop flight from Japan to the United States. The flight was highly successful, breaking four Army Air Forces records.

J. Ivan Potts, Jr. of Shelbyville, Tennessee was one of the pilots on General LeMay's crew.

The following story is his account of the record-breaking flight. It is a part of his book, REMEMBRANCE OF WAR, published in 1995. Copies are available from Ivan at Post Office Box 1021, Shelbyville, TN 37162 for \$25.00 postage paid.

THE JAPAN TO WASHINGTON FLIGHT

September 18-19 1945

By J. Ivan Potts, Jr.

After the signing of the surrender, September on Tinian became a month of rumors and speculation about when the group would pull out for home. To keep us occupied everyone was assigned duties in addition to being an air crew member.

I was the squadron gravel officer. The gravel officer with three trucks and three drivers, spent most of the day hauling ground coral to repair the sidewalks and the streets around the quonset area. The rest of the time we spent trying to track down trucks and Jeeps the Marines had stolen, driven out of gasoline and left parked somewhere on the island. We had more than enough points. We had won the war and were ready to go home.

I had been flying with Lt. Col. Bill Kingsbury, Squadron Commander of the 25th Bombardment Squadron. Late in the war he and I had become good friends. One morning Lt. Col. Kingsbury came over to me and said, "They are picking a crew from the 58th Wing to compete in a selection down on Guam for a flight back to the United States and I think we have a pretty good chance of being picked as part of the crew to go back."

After a couple of days, he informed me that we were in fact going to Guam to represent the 58th Wing. I didn't know at the time that we were going to attempt a non stop flight to the United States.

Kingsbury, Tisdal Jones, Jerome School and I were the members of the crew from the 25th. The rest of the crew were hand picked from among the combat veterans of the 40th Bombardment Group. I was in elite company.

After a complete evaluation of every airplane in the group, our airplane was finally selected. It was number 44-70015, a model B-29- 75, a Wichita model, selected because it always seemed to fly its missions with no difficulty. The main considerations were fuel consumption, oil consumption and overall reliability.

On Guam, our plane was modified for our non-stop attempt. Five six hundred gallon tanks were installed in the bomb bays. Everything was stripped that was not absolutely necessary for the flight. All the guns and gun turrets were removed and the skin of the airplane re-covered. The blisters atop and on the sides of the plane were replaced with square flush windows. The 40th Group markings were removed, leaving a solid silver bird which was waxed and polished to an almost new finish. The only marking remaining was our Air Force star. Then our new tail insignia was installed, the emblem of the Twentieth Air Force. Nothing was spared to assist our Superfortress prepare for its challenging mission.

Colonel William Blanchard joined us at Guam. He was now Chief of Staff of the Twentieth Air Force. We were crew Number Two. Plane Number One would fly Lt. General Barney Giles, Deputy Commander of the United States Strategic Air Forces in the Pacific and Commander of the flight.

Major General Curtis E. LeMay, Chief of Staff of the Strategic Air Forces, would command our plane. The Number Three plane would carry Brigadier General Emmett O'Donnell, Commanding General of the Seventy Third Wing.

Preparations for the flight consumed around ten days. The flight plan was drafted and ground crews worked around the clock getting the planes ready. Our course to the United States would take us from the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido to Nome and Fairbanks in Alaska, White Horse in the Yukon and Edmonton in Alberta, Canada. The only field large enough to accommodate us was Mizutani on Hokkaido, the

northernmost island of Japan. An alternate southern route was planned in case of bad weather. It would have covered Kiska, Adak, Dutch Harbor and Juneau, Alaska, a total of 6762 miles.

On September 15, we took off for Hokkaido. We were all a little apprehensive as we approached the island. There was no information about the runways. We had no information about the fuel availability or whether the weight of the B-29s would be too much for the field. Colonel Blanchard had gone to the island a few days before and established that the field would accommodate us although there was no fuel for our airplanes. Of course, General LeMay solved the fuel problem as he had in China by sending in some C-54s with 55 gallon drums of gasoline on board. We were old hands at fueling our airplanes from drums.

The Japanese airbase was populated with quite a number of Mitsubishi G-4-M "Bettys" which apparently had been flown on a large number of missions. The propellers and guns had been taken off in accordance with the terms of the surrender. It was rather surprising to see these planes with no propellers.

We spent two nights at Sapporo, preparing for the flight home. We had virtually no clothes with us; just one change of khakis and a flying suit were all we had to bring home to the United States. We were issued new style rations that had come from somewhere and it was the first time I had had hot C-rations since I had been overseas. They were pretty good and contained a ground beef patty. Even back then we Americans loved our ground beef patties.

Our airdrome, Mizutani at Chitose, a suburb of Sapporo, was chosen for our take off because it was one of the fields in Japan with long concrete runways. It was built by the Japanese to send four engined bombers on one way suicide missions against our west coast cities. The runways were 8200 feet long and were virtually at sea level which would give greater lift to our heavy planes.

On the morning of Tuesday, the 18th of September, we were awakened long before dawn to make final preparations for our take off. A weather ship was taking off about an hour ahead of the flight to explore winds aloft and report any unexpected storms. Far in the north, super Dumbos and Dumbos, B-29s and B-17s, equipped for air-sea rescue, were standing by on alert. They would take off instantly, on word that any of our three planes were in any kind of trouble.

Mizutani Airfield was very dark and very chilly in the heavy mist of the early morning on Hokkaido. The field was unlighted and flashlights and truck headlamps lit our way to our sky giants.

General LeMay decided he would let Lt. Colonel Kingsbury perform the task of getting airplane Number Two airborne. We had 10,000 gallons of gasoline on board, as much as a railroad tank car. We weighed 144,000 pounds, the heaviest overload ever attempted in a B-29. As the light began to appear in the eastern sky, we taxied out. As General Giles' plane, Number One, began its roll down the runway, we moved out and into position. Brakes were set, engines checked, lift flaps were lowered, propeller pitch run forward and the check list completed.

It was now our turn. Lt. Col. Kingsbury ran the throttles forward. As our engines developed their full power, the brakes were released and we began to move down the runway. Little by little our speed increased. We used up all of the 8200 feet and were in the gravel past the end when we finally left the earth at 142 MPH indicated air speed. The tension was heavy as we broke away from the ground. There was no room for error or malfunction. If anything had gone wrong, it would have been good-bye to crew and airplane. We were so heavily loaded that if one of our four engines had failed or partially lost power on take off we would have crashed off the end of the runway. For hours into the flight we struggled until enough fuel was used to make it safe for three engine flight. Then for several more hours our airplane would not have flown on two engines. If we had been forced to ditch or bail out in the Arctic water, we would have faced almost certain death.

We were off at 6:15 AM, Hokkaido time (4:15 PM, Washington time). Our expected arrival in Washington was to be 5:00 PM Eastern War Time the following afternoon, after twenty six hours elapsed flying time on the trip that would take us a quarter of the way around the globe. Our climb was gentle and slow, partly because we must conserve our fuel and also because of the excessive weight.

General Giles had our only weather officer on board his plane. Only two or three hours out he reported that we were running into slight headwinds, but changed his report when the General threatened to throw him overboard unless he did something about it.

The purpose of our route over the top of the world was two fold; first, it was the most direct route to Washington, second, we were hoping to take advantage of the two hundred mile winds of the "jet stream". Our 'B-29s had discovered these tremendous winds over Japan and we expected to use them to extend our range over Alaska and Canada. But things weren't going to wash out that way. A typhoon had been off Okinawa for about a week prior to our flight. We didn't realize it at this time and would discover later, the typhoon had actually reversed the winds over Japan and over the path of our flight.

General Giles' weather officer was right. We were beginning to encounter some headwinds.

About five hours out of Hokkaido we came upon Kamchatka Siberia and we got our first view of the Russian mainland. As we cruised along, suddenly three P-63 Cobra Fighters appeared off our wing. They had the big Red Star and some of us didn't know what to expect. We were not sure what the Russians were going to do at any time, but pleasantly they presented us with a show of acrobatics around our planes. They flew on with us a few minutes, then dipped their wings in salute and disappeared into the west.

Our three planes were flying pretty close together. Each of us was doing their own navigation, maintaining constant radio contact and hourly reporting his position to the others.

The pilots rotated at the controls through the flight. General LeMay was at the controls about seven hours. Being the lowest ranking pilot, my time in the seat was not during the most exciting segments of the trip. Weather was our greatest concern, and we were constantly checking on it.

Somewhere over the Aleutians and almost on top of the magnetic north pole, the gyro compass started tumbling and it became increasingly difficult to be exactly sure where we were at any given time. To compound the navigators problems, the radio compass went out shortly thereafter. It would come back into operation later in the flight to be of some help.

About twelve hours out of Hokkaido, we were southwest of Nome, Alaska. It was quite dark. We had finished the shortest day of our lives. It was now 1:00 AM, Washington time.

In another hour we were just south of St Lawrence Island and had crossed the Bering Sea. Cold was now beginning to penetrate the airplane. Even our fur-lined flying suits were unable to keep out the cold.

Over Nome we were treated to our first display of the Northern Lights. The long ribbons of eerie lights were magnificent from our ringside seats, four miles up. As we moved over Nome we could see a few lights on the ground. By this time our gasoline load was lighter and we could move a little faster, so we moved our air speed to 200 MPH, indicated.

The Northern Lights continued in view from Nome to Fairbanks. At 6:20 AM, Eastern War Time, the temperature was twenty five degrees below zero. The New York Times reported, "the men inside the planes lolled in shirt sleeves, warmed by the planes heating systems". The facts were that we were very cold. Although our pressurization was still operating, the cold Arctic air had overcome our heating systems which seemed to have completely broken down.

Over Fairbanks, the first heavy headwinds were encountered. At 7:00 AM, our radio operators reported that we were over Northway, Alaska. "About this time", reported navigator Bill Townes, "it occurred to me that we were not on schedule and had been bucking much stronger headwinds since we left Fairbanks. When I reported that fact to General LeMay, he looked at me as if he thought it was my fault, so I retreated behind the bulkhead to check my figures."

By 9:00 AM, we were 370 miles southeast of White Horse in the Yukon. It was about 5:30 AM .Yukon time and the sunlight was now visible in the east. It was dawn again but we had had practically no rest during the night. Sleep had been virtually impossible. Not only had the excitement of the trip kept us awake, but we were very very cold. We were now seventeen hours into the flight.

We had been buffeted by unpredicted headwinds ever since we passed over Nome. As we crossed the Canadian border, General LeMay reported later that we began to hit the "stinkingest stuff" of the whole trip. Not only had the headwinds over Alaska cut our air speed, but also the rime and clear ice which had formed on our wings slowed us down. (Rime ice is an opaque, amorphous formation that accumulates irregularly on the leading edges of the wings and tail surfaces and as festooned growths on propeller hubs and other exposed structures.) The deicing equipment on B-29s had been removed to increase their speed in combat, so we had to struggle through the night with this added load.

The headwinds continued to increase. The first decision that a fuel stop would be necessary was made as we neared Regina. General Giles' plane was to land at Minneapolis, General O'Donnell was to land at Detroit and since our plane had more fuel, we were to continue on. At 2:00 PM. General Giles radioed, "Have been bucking headwinds for past nine hours. Predicted plans for Fairbanks to States did not materialize. Giles and O'Donnell plan to land at Minneapolis and Detroit due to fuel. Plane Number Two, commanded by LeMay, believes he is able to get to Washington."

The three bombers separated. By now the air speed had slowed to 176 MPH. General Giles amended his decision to land at Minneapolis and have General O'Donnell land at Detroit. He had concluded that both fields were too small for our big planes. He and O'Donnell then both changed course for Chicago.

General LeMay asked our radio operator to send a message to the War Department that we would keep coming. As we flew on New York papers were headlined, "Two B-29s will land to refuel as third roars on to Capitol".

As we approached Chicago, General LeMay radioed to check on the weather in Washington and was informed it was marginal. Bill Townes and Captain Theodore Finder, the flight engineer, estimated we had enough gasoline to make Washington.

General LeMay talked to Washington again and then decided to return to Chicago and stay with the other planes. Our plane had been the last to give up the non-stop to Washington attempt.

In 1981, at the California reunion of the 40th Bombardment Group, General LeMay told some of the members of the flight that he wanted to go on to Washington but he was directed by the War Department to turn back. We still had close to a thousand gallons of fuel in reserve. Some of the members of our crew thought the fact that General LeMay had two stars and General Giles had three, had more to do with our turning back than with our ability to complete the flight alone.

Shortly after 6:00 PM, General LeMay sent a message to Washington that we would return to Chicago. General O'Donnell landed in Chicago at 5:43 Eastern War Time. General Giles landed at 6:30. We landed thirteen minutes later, a total of twenty-seven hours and thirty minutes out of Japan.

We crew members all crawled out in Chicago and drank some very welcome coffee while waiting to resume our flight. The only people who talked to the press in Chicago were Captain Kermit Beahan and General Giles. Beahan was the bombardier of the plane that dropped atom bomb number two on Nagasaki, Japan. After we refueled, we were ready to take off again.

"The silvery sky giants, manned by their blue ribbon crews, which had streaked across Alaska and Canada on the homeward leg of their ambitious mission, roared over National Airport in formation at 9:30 PM Eastern War Time".

This was the way one national correspondent reported our arrival. General Giles landed at 9:52, next General LeMay at 9:54 and finally General O'Donnell at 9:56.

The reception in Washington was absolutely fantastic. Since we had landed in Chicago, everyone in Washington had time to get over to the National Airport to meet us. There appeared to be thousands of people packed in behind the fences at the ATC terminal. Guards kept all but military personnel and news representatives behind the gates.

We encountered a short delay before deplaning from our aircraft. LeMay wouldn't leave until he had firmly implanted a freshly lighted cigar in his mouth.

We were literally agog at the large delegation meeting us in the half-light as we deplaned. Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson was first in the receiving line. General Arnold, our Air Force Commanding General was next. General Arnold was later to write a letter of commendation for our record-breaking flight.

The Army Air Force had flown all of our parents into Washington earlier in the day from all over the country. A tired, bearded, and grimy group of fliers were greeted by wives and parents for the first time in over a year.

The Air Force moved all of the crews over to the Statler hotel, arriving there about 10:30. The lobby was a madhouse. People were everywhere. Lt. Bill Dolan, one of General Giles' pilots, and I were standing in our wrinkled flight clothes, waiting for our parents who were being brought to the hotel in separate cars. People crowded around and asked if we would sign some autographs. We sat down on the floor in the middle of the lobby and began writing on everything imaginable. It was well after midnight before we got to our rooms and collapsed.

The morning of September 20th, we all gathered with our generals in the Grand Showroom of the Statler where Hildegard had welcomed some of us the previous evening. General LeMay gathered us all around him. The atmosphere was completely relaxed as a contrast to the previous days.

Virtually all the questions by the reporters at the press conference were put to General LeMay. He used the time to emphasize the significance of the flight in reverse. "Now that we have proved that we can do it, we must now remember that any future enemy will also be able to do it". General LeMay added, "When we took off at Hokkaido we had a little headwind and expected it. However, all our information indicated that once we passed Fairbanks it would drop. We didn't need a tail wind. All we needed was a nice normal wind to arrive on schedule. The buffeting headwind, averaged 70 MPH". He went on to add, "This trip proved a lot. The B-29 Superfortress went right from the drawing board into battle without any real test as to what it could or could not do. We found out that the B-29 can and will perform beautifully on long range trips, belligerent or otherwise."

Later that morning all the members of the three crews met with General Giles in the same room. We were presented with the Distinguished Flying Cross, my second. General Giles gave us all our equipment as a remembrance of the flight. I packed up everything I had brought home with me except my parachute. General Giles said we could even have that if we wanted it. He also said he'd send me home in an Air Force plane. I told him, "Thank you General, I think I'll take the train!"

The War Department said, "The flight is a concrete example of the current and future potentialities of air power."

General Arnold said, "The purpose of the flight was to see what might be expected of existing long range aircraft. The B-29 had gone into production with no service test. This was a service test."

It was the longest non-stop flight in Air Force history.

It was the first Grand Circle flight in history.

It was the fastest non-stop flight of its distance in history.

It was the first non-stop flight from Japan to the United States.

But records are made to be broken.

