

The Shortened Life of B-29 42-6268

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Place of events, Chakulia, India

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B-29 42-6268 was among the first generation of production aircraft to come off the assembly line in Wichita, probably in February, 1944. It was assigned to the 44th Bomb Squadron of the 40th Bomb Group. Maj. Donald Roberts was given the command of this plane which was among 36 40th Bomb Group B-29s that arrived at the Chakulia, India US Army Airfield in April, 1944. If my memory is correct, M/sgt Louis Hauelsen was crew chief of the ground maintenance crew.

It was with Major Roberts and his combat crew that I began my first flight over the Hump to A-1, our advance base in Hsinching, China. Ground crew men accompanied the planes to China in order to assist the limited number of forward base permanent personnel in the maintenance and repairs needed during flight operations there. I was privileged to sit on the nose wheel door next to Flight Engineer Elmo Grey. The forward bomb bay carried three 600 gallon auxiliary fuel tanks, while twenty 500 lb. bombs hung from the racks in the aft bay. Take-off on that summer morning in 1944 was normal, but before we reached our assigned altitude over India (or Burma?) the #4 engine began running rough. F/O Grey told Maj. Roberts it would be necessary to shut down that engine, abort the flight and return to base. Upon hearing this, the bombardier asked Maj. Roberts if he should salvo the bombs. Turning to the flight engineer, Major Roberts asked what the weight and the landing speed would be. The plane's load exceeded the Boeing gross weight specifications and our landing speed would exceed 150 mph (133 knots). Major Roberts' reply to the bombardier was something like this, "No, don't salvo the bombs. Someone on the ground might get hurt. We'll land without dropping them." The landing speed was faster than normal, but the pilot made the smoothest landing of his career and was helped by the co-pilot to ride the brakes and stop the plane short of the end of the concrete runway. Thus came to an end my first opportunity to fly into China. The 44th sqdn. Instrument Specialist in Hsinching, Sgt. Sam Bucheri would have to take care of any instrument work on the planes that week in China by himself.

Some weeks later this B-29 was grounded for repairs due to the lack of replacement parts. When it was finally airworthy again Major Roberts and his crew took the plane up for a test flight on Sept. 16, 1944 - the day of its demise seven months after it was delivered from the Wichita factory. As they returned to base they entered the downwind leg of the traffic pattern at about 800 feet altitude. When the landing gear was lowered the #2 engine

caught fire. While they were still on the downwind leg, it burned so fiercely that the engine dropped from the motor mounts to the ground below. The pilot continued downwind and made a normal turn onto the base leg, and then onto final approach. The landing gear was fully extended but the left wheel was not locked down. As the weight of the plane settled onto the landing gear that strut collapsed, causing the plane to ground-loop to the left off the runway. The plane did not catch fire and all of the flight crew were able to exit safely from the plane. Other than being frightened and upset, there were no physical injuries. M/sgt Haueisen and his crew were joined by specialists to cannibalize the downed plane even as it sat next to the runway. I was among those who removed needed parts to return to T/Sgt John Pigg in Tech. Supply.

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The writer of this anecdote was an eyewitness to the incident.