



JEFF SKILES

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



B-29s of the 504th Bomb Group fly past Japan's Mount Fuji in 1945 on a bombing mission. The photo was taken from Pretty Baby, a B-29 piloted by Art McElmurry.

Pretty Baby

Following a World War II cadet through to a B-29 cockpit, Part 4

BY JEFF SKILES

This column is reprinted from My Memories of World War II, an unpublished memoir by Art McElmurry. The following is entirely in his words. Art is the grandfather of EAA multimedia journalist Brady Lane.

THE B-29 WAS POWERED by four Curtiss-Wright engines each rated at 2,200 hp. Early on the engines ran too hot, swallowed valves, and used excessive oil and fuel. The first ones were questionable and unreliable at best. *Pretty Baby* had two crew compartments that were pressurized to an altitude of 8,000 feet permitting us to fly without oxygen masks. However, the plane was depressurized while flying in enemy areas to avoid any emergencies caused by losing pressure that could arise in case of a hit.

In the forward cabin were the pilots, bombardier, engineer, navigator, and radio operator. The aft cabin held three gun-sighting stations. The tail gunner flew most of the time in the aft cabin and

would go to the tail station only while in combat zone. The radar operator was located just aft of the gunnery stations. A pressurized tunnel, big enough for a person to crawl through, connected the two cabins, passing through the upper part of the two bomb bays.

On December 20, 1944, we received orders to proceed to Mather Army Air Force Base near Sacramento, California, for an overseas destination. At Mather Field we were ordered to depart shortly after midnight on December 28 for John Rodgers Army Air Force Base in Honolulu and then on to Johnston Island, to Kwajalein Atoll in

the Marshall Islands, and to Tinian. Our route out passed near the Golden Gate Bridge—the lights on the bridge was my last view of the United States.

TINIAN

Tinian is in the Mariana island group 100 miles northwest of Guam and only 3.5 miles south of Saipan. B-29s based on all three islands flew the long 1,500 miles to Tokyo and back. The island is roughly 7 to 8 miles long and some 3.5 miles at the widest point and consists of 40 square miles of limestone and coral rock covered by a few inches of topsoil on which the Japanese had grown sugar cane.

On January 1 when we arrived, the Seabees were still working around the clock on North Field where we landed. When completed, North Field had four paralleled, 8,500 feet long by 200 feet wide, east-west runways. The east end of the runways had a 30-foot drop-off to the water, which saved many overloaded B-29s laboring to take off. Most of our takeoffs were to the east. On the west side of the island were some cliffs of 100 feet. West Field, located near the center of the island, had two 8,500 by 200 feet, east-west paralleled runways. After everything was completed, Tinian was the largest military airfield complex in the world.

The XXI Bomber Command, under the command of Gen. Curtis LeMay, with headquarters in Guam, had five wings—each wing had four groups—each group had three squadrons of 15 crews each. The XXI Bomber Command had approximately 900 B-29s. It did not take long to learn that we were in combat, and this was the reason we had been training for some 22 months. Now was payback time!

THE EMPIRE OF JAPAN

Most of the missions to the Japanese mainland averaged 15 to 16 hours of flying time and the better part of 24 hours from start to finish. Engine start and taxi were all coordinated with takeoff time in order to conserve each gallon of precious gas.

Lt. Don Allenby was our airplane commander with over 1,000 hours in a B-17 prior to qualifying on the B-29. He was a career

military man and had some overseas duty. Don was an excellent pilot and knew the B-17 very well. His relationship to the crew was strictly military, particularly with the enlisted men.

It was nothing unusual for our wing to have 150 or more planes on a mission. As one plane started its takeoff roll, the plane in the starting position on the adjacent parallel runway would start easing forward all four throttles. Every 75 seconds a bomber would take off. With all four throttles fully open, it was all that Don and I could do to hold *Pretty Baby*. When we received the green light, both of us would simultaneously release the foot brakes and *Pretty Baby* would almost leap forward. For many missions our gross weight was 139,000 pounds, well over the maximum overload weight of 135,000 pounds. The *Baby* with full throttle labored down the runway, and often Don and I would pull the plane up at the end of the runway and over the cliff. The plane would just mush along 30 feet above the water until we raised the wheels and trimmed the plane to reduce drag and increase our speed. It was a long, hard flight to the Empire of Japan.

When the radar operator reported that we were about 100 miles from making landfall, Don ordered the crew to prepare for combat. If the altitude of the mission was to be 10,000 feet or higher, everyone put on an oxygen mask and the flight engineer depressurized the plane. After it was depressurized, the bombardier entered the forward bomb bay and pulled the pins in the detonators on the bombs. One of the gunners, in the back, did the same thing in the rear bomb bay. Now the bombs were all cocked and ready to go. Since the outside temperature could be well below zero at altitude, we got in a winter flight suit, gloves, a steel helmet, and a flak apron (front and back). After the first mission, we realized there was as much danger from flak exploding below as there was from shells exploding around us. We quickly found a piece of a flak apron to sit on.

As the war progressed we saw more and more kamikaze (suicide) pilots. These fellows sole objective was to ram the B-29.

They were deadly at night because of the difficulty of seeing them. Searchlights were another weapon feared by crews. As a bomber approached a defended area at night, the searchlights would come on and pan the sky. When the light hit the plane, it would lock on, and immediately five or six more lights would lock on making a cone. It was next to impossible for a pilot to maneuver a heavy bomber out of a cone. A coned-in plane drew all the attention of fighters and flak guns.

After dropping the bombs, the next objective was to get out to sea—away from flak and fighters. Upon releasing the bombs, which could be up to 20,000 pounds, Don and I had to quickly retrim the plane to maintain control. Even though we have guns to fire back and bombs to drop, one feels so lonely and helpless over the target.

FIRE FROM THE SKY

The blitz missions with incendiary bombs were timed to be over the targets at night. We learned during the briefing for the April 15 mission that our targets were Kawasaki and Tokyo. Before landfall we saw the fires from the incendiary bombs already burning up ahead. Shortly, the searchlights got us—we were coned in along with three other bombers. Flak and fighters were everywhere—they shot down two of the four of us in cones. Then came the thermals from the fires below. It is difficult to describe the severity of them. Due to the strong updrafts and downdrafts, *Pretty Baby* was literally tossed all over the sky. One second she would be in a steep climb, and the next second only the seat belt kept us off the ceiling as the bottom dropped out. Other times the plane fell away in a twisting, bucking motion.

Around midnight on May 31 we were briefed for another visit to Osaka—a daylight incendiary mission (mixed in with the firebombs were fragmentation bombs to discourage the firefighters). We were to lead one of the elements of the formation. All went as planned until we neared the target. Then everything broke loose—the sky was black with flak, there were fighters everywhere, some flown by kamikaze pilots. During the bomb run the plane on our right

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wing received a direct hit and had to drop out. I think most, if not everybody in our formation received some damage but was able to complete the bomb run. After clearing the coast we heard a distress call and thinking it might be our right wing man, we tried to find him. Even though we were in and out of clouds, the crew in distress was located. It was our Circle E crew. They had two engines out on one side and could not maintain altitude. To lighten the load, they threw out everything not fastened down—guns, ammunition, the put-put unit (portable generator) in the back, everything they could. About the only assistance we could offer was to stay with them, give encouragement, and assure them that if they had to ditch or parachute, we would give their exact location to rescue units. They were finally able to stabilize their altitude at 500 feet over the water, and both of us landed safely at Iwo Jima.

On one mission we ran into more headwind than estimated and the ETA and gas consumption became a very serious matter. With no island in sight, Don and I discussed our options—bail out or ditch. When we finally landed, one engine stopped on the runway (out of gas) and another quit on the taxi strip.

When one considers the conditions under which we flew missions, every takeoff was a miracle. The plane was from 1 to 2 tons over the maximum overload takeoff weight, which greatly increased the possibility of engine failure due to the engines' tendency of overheating under maximum power. Engine failure during takeoff was bad news with a capital BAD. The crew was surrounded with some 9,000 gallons of gasoline and 5 to 10 tons of explosive bombs.

THE FINAL MISSION

On August 14, we had a mining job to do. It was back to Flak Alley—the Shimonoseki Straits. In the briefing, Col. Martin told us the Japanese might ask for a “cease-fire.” If the request came and was agreed to by the president, the code word “October” would be sent by radio to all

crews. This meant to jettison the mines and return to the base. If we had already armed the mines for the bomb run, which we did before entering the target area, we would have to fly to a designated area to jettison them for the safety of our own navy. All the way up to Japan our radio operator kept glued to the radio—but no “October.” The Japanese around Shimonoseki were not aware of any possible cease-fire agreement—the flak was moderate, but enemy fighters were very active. In our group one airman was injured and two planes received major damage. About halfway back, we received the word “October.” I do not have the vocabulary to describe the feeling—no more flak, no more kamikaze pilots—no more fighters coming out of the sun—and those dreaded searchlights, no more.

PROLOGUE

From my minute piece of the action, I can verify the cost. In our 398th Squadron of 15 crews, there were 11 B-29s lost with most of the 121 crewmen killed. In our 504th Bomb Group of 45 crews, 28 B-29s were lost.

From February 26, 1943, when I entered the service it had been two years and 282 days and a world of experiences that had matured a country kid from Oklahoma into a man. About midnight on Monday, September 24, 1945, I saw the lights of the Golden Gate Bridge again. What a view!

Art McElmurry flew 35 missions in the Pacific and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. His experiences were representative of the sacrifices of the 2.6 million men and women who were part of the U.S. Army Air Forces during a war that spanned the entire globe. Art was blessed to live a full and satisfying life. Forty thousand of his fellow airmen never saw home again. To them and all who served our country, we owe our undying gratitude. EAA

Jeff Skiles, EAA 336120, is EAA vice president of communities and member programs. He can be reached at jskiles@eaa.org.