

B-29 Revelations

of Colonel Ray K. Childress
Submitted by Lee Fisher



With a little push from my friend, Bill Beckwith, to record for my kinfolks and posterity incidents and activities a person can run into while flying B-29's during WWII. There are several events which made personal lasting imprints; belly-landing a B-29 at night, being hit with an 'aerial' bomb, and taking photos for a possible landing area for the military ground unit near Singapore. Hopefully, my experiences will encourage others to document their episodes in B-29's or other aircraft during the WWII era.



Bottom list: Joseph W. Crume, Jr., tail gunner: Harry B. Worley, radio operation: Clair R. McKnight, right gunner: Joseph B. Morris, left gunner: Francis A. Weise, gunner control. Top list: Raymond K. Childress, aircraft commander-pilot: William H. Lynch, navigator: Thomas J. Drummy, flight engineer: Anthony S. Rojko, radar operator: James O. Ballard, bombardier: and Leonard J. Brady, co-pilot.

Belly-landing

In January of 1944, our B-29 unit was stationed at Walker Air Base, Kansas on 'fast track' training for deployment to attack Japanese targets, which were beyond the range of B-17's and B-24's. The B-29 Superfortress, which began flight tests in September 1942, brought new advances in speed, range and bomb loads. Our plane was the 14th built by Boeing. Our crew had been sent on a ten-hour training mission flying to Kentucky and back, the seventh time I was at the controls of the plane. It was about nine hours into the flight when No. 2 engine stopped due to the absence of fuel. The planes were so new that fuel consumption was still being developed. My flight engineer tried to transfer fuel from the No. 3 tank but was unable to do so due to the wire used in the fuel transfer system was undersized.

When I got the aircraft down to about 2,000 feet and I was very sure I would have to crash land the airplane, I told my crew to bail out as quickly as possible. The nose of the B-29 was affectionately called the 'greenhouse' because of the vast amount of glass surrounding the pilot and co-pilot. Looking out through that expanse of glass in the predawn, I saw the Kansas countryside rushing up to meet me.

It was then I started to think about where I was going to land. I decided when my altitude was less than 500 feet that I would land wheels

up on a road just past the curve that I could see with my landing lights. It was then I saw a large house, barn and outhouses in danger of the plane hitting them. I altered my course to work the airplane above that area. There was no reason to endanger the family in that home. I pulled up and noticed I was going to run right into a bluff of a hill and pulled up as far as I could. I could see the lights of the airfield and could possibly have made it to the field had I gotten over the bluff. The airplane hit the ground at the very top of the hill in a landing position.

I later learned the rumble of the crash shook the house of the Counts family situated on an oil lease. They could see the flames about a quarter mile away. The plane had slid along the bluff and stuck an oil derrick which added to the blaze. Kellis Count and his nine year old son, Marion, jumped into the family's 1939 Chevrolet and headed into the oil patch. They saw me, bloody and in shock, staggering toward them.

I found myself some 300 feet more to the back of the airplane, not knowing how I got out. It was not until I looked over my shoulder that I found the empennage outlining the fire from the derrick oil well, caused when the left wing hit it. The Counts family relates that I complained about being cold as they brought me to the farmhouse. By the time the ambulance from the base arrived, I was bungled in no less than 13 blankets.

Having had all my 10 crew members bail out, I was most anxious to find out what had happened to them. Through the use of party line phones, it was most comforting to find all of them had come down in good shape.

After a couple weeks in the hospital, I was released to continue training with my crew. Our crew was assigned an aircraft to fly to India. We departed Walker Air Base April 13, 1944. On the 61st Anniversary of the crash landing, Marian Counts, who had kept in touch with me, and my wife, over the years, visited us in our San Antonio home.

Kuala Lumpur and the Silver Star While still stationed in India at Paradoba, 65 miles NNE of Calcutta, the Group Operations Officer approached me at the Officers Club one evening with a question. Would I be interested in volunteering to fly a photo mission the next day? He said he thought of me and my crew as likely candidates for the mission since I had functioned, at times, as a Group photographer and every one knew of my interest in photography.

After ample consideration and discussion with crewmember James O. Ballard, bombardier, and William H. Lynch, navigator, I told him we would give it a go. The aerial mapping mission was laid out in a briefing. We were to take pictures of a projection of land near Kuala Lumpur north east of Singapore being considered as the site of a possible amphibious landing. The area to be mapped was in the general shape of a triangle with a base. This was to be the longest photo strip taken, of approximately 165 miles and of such depth as to dictate six parallel runs to obtain the required side overlap of photos. It would require more than 3 hours to complete the project without interruptions. The combination of camera lenses to be used called for us to maintain an altitude of 20,000 feet. Maintaining a stable platform was essential since the camera was not gyro mounted.

Upon arriving in the target area, we realized we would have to alter our altitude as there was a



thin layer of broken clouds at about 20,000 feet. We lowered our altitude and were proceeding on the first photo strip when we spotted Japanese fighter planes. They had taken off from an air base in the immediate area and were climbing to our altitude. We continued our photo mapping passes with them on close pursuit. They would attack until all their ammunition and/or the fuel was expended, land, refuel, climb back up and attack again.

This went on for better than three and a half hours. We did, on occasion, go up and hide in the clouds at the end of a strip when it seemed the propitious thing to do. Also, we altered our altitude for some of the strips, being mindful not to do so while photographing the strip, per se. In spite of all the training we were giving the Japanese fighter jocks, we decided to be sure we had the photos to provide adequate coverage of the object area by flying an additional strip before departing for home base.

Needless to say, we ran out of ammunition soon after the fighter attacks began. It was certainly no fun having to sit there watching the impending attacks without a means, even evasive action, to counteract them. On some of the head-on attacks, one in particular, the fighter came close enough to make the pilot clearly visible.

We were delighted when, some days later, we were informed that it had been possible to construct a map of the area which provided stereographic views of the topography using the photos we had taken. While the entire crew deserves to take a bow for a mission successfully completed, it is navigator Bill Lynch who should receive the accolades for having kept us on the prescribed flight strips. This was not an easy task considering all of the gyrating and dodging done in between strips to avoid the fighter attacks to the maximum extent possible.

I was told subsequent to the completion of the mission that six aircraft had been lost attempting this particular photo mission, a fact I can not personally verify. Needless to say, our attitude

about the whole affair would have no doubt changed had we been privy to this information before hand. And did I learn a lesson? You bet! During and after the completion of the mission, I was reminded of the old Army adage; don't volunteer for nothing. I have endeavored to keep that advice in mind ever since.

Aerial Bomb

It all started in the briefing at our base, A-3 in China, which was located some 50 miles from Chengtu. The target for the mission we were about to fly was the tank farm, oil and gas, located on the outskirts of Anchan, Manchuria. We received the usual course and target briefing as well as a short summary of the enemy opposition we could expect. We were to expect moderate to heavy fighter attacks in the target area as well as moderate to heavy radar controlled flak. Additionally, we were shown the locations of a number of Jap staging bases situated along our route from which we might expect to be intercepted by fighter aircraft. We were also made aware of the fact that, other than the first 200 miles from base, we would be flying over Jap controlled territory.

The scariest aspect of the mission was the altitude of the bombing run at 19,000 feet! We had been bombing from altitudes of 25-26,000 feet which put us above the effective ceiling of both the Jap and fighter aircraft. At 19,000 feet I had the sensation, shared by most of the crew members, that we would be flying right down the Jap's gun barrels.

B/G Curtis E. LeMay ended the briefing with a terse statement explaining his reasoning for lowering the bombing altitude. The pure and simple fact was that we hadn't been knocking out the pin-point targets, which meant that missions had to be re-flown with the attendant operational losses. In addition to his desire that our bombing be more effective, he seemed to be saying that, "My motto is to lose lives to save lives!" In other words, knock out the targets the first time over and



obviate the necessity of flying the mission again.

Other than the takeoff, which was always precarious loaded as we were, the flight to the target was rather uneventful. We joined with three other aircraft in a four-ship formation at the rendezvous point for our run over the target. This was the largest formation we thought we could handle at the time. The enemy opposition was surprisingly light due mainly to a heavy blanket of clouds just below us.

After bomb release one plane lagged behind having gone on cruise control. The two ships in front took a divergent course. Upon being informed by Lynch, our navigator, that neither was on the correct course, I decided to take a solo flight back to China. We remained at 19,000 feet and soon found ourselves flying in the security of a high layer of clouds.

About two hours from the target I decided

to get some relief and made the trip through the tunnel that ran the length of the two bomb bays, back to the rear compartment to use the 'can'. This was located in proximity to the radar operator's position. Not being in a hurry, I took a soft back novel from the lower pocket of my flying suit, which had been given to me by my roommate shortly before leaving the briefing room, entitled "The Overtures of Death". He said I might find it entertaining on the flight to and from the target area. What a title! While reading a couple of chapters and talking with Anthony Rojko, our radar operator, I asked him how we were doing as far as our course was concerned. He replied, "Sir, I believe we are some 20 to 30 miles south of course which would put us directly over one of the Jap staging bases. In fact, sir, we are under attack right now!" Almost simultaneously, the chatter of gunfire erupted.

The next thing I recall is regaining my seat in the cockpit. I have no recollection of leaving the can or of the return trip through the tunnel. Leonard Brady, co-pilot, who had left the airplane on autopilot, informed me that we had been attacked by a single aircraft from the front quarter. Thomas Drummer, flight engineer, reported the loss of oil pressure reading from No.1 engine. A quick visual check revealed a bullet hole through the inside-front of the No. 1 cowling. Seeing no other fighters, we decided to feather the prop on that engine. Much too soon, James Ballard, bombardier, spotted nine Jap fighters echeloned to the left climbing for altitude in front of us. Once we saw the planes turn our way from the upper left quadrant, we unfeathered No. 1 and went to turbo 10, full power, knowing full well that we were taking a chance on the engine freezing up from the lack of oil. I also knew we could only feather the engine one and a half more times. As the first plane neared firing range, I took the airplane off autopilot.

It was during the firing phase of the first attack that I knew my tactic was going to have to be modified considerably when I saw a rather large object fall from the fighter right in the path of my intended flight. We continued diving and turning into each fighter as it approached but having to pull out a little sooner than desired as each fighter dropped the same looking object.

As the last fighter we saw from the cockpit had completed its pass and was diving away, we thought we were home 'Scott free'. Suddenly we heard an explosion immediately accompanied by rapid decompression and a pall of blue haze in the cockpit. What in the world had happened?

At this point I believe Francis Wiese, our top fire control gunner, was the only one aboard the plane that had inkling as to the origin of the explosion. He had seen a fighter coming in from nine o'clock high in a coordinated attack with the last plane attacking from the front and saw it drop its bomb. He apparently became so mesmerized

that he failed to report the attack on the intercom. He saw the bomb hit the top of the rear bomb bay and explode.

We assessed the damage done and thanked the Lord upon learning that no one had been killed or wounded. However, we weren't happy to learn that all our radios and the radar had been knocked out as well as our main hydraulic system. On the other hand, we realized that the bomb had hit the only part of our plane it could hit without knocking us out of the sky. Having survived the attack and seeing no other fighters in the area, we again feathered No. 1. Now it would be no use to us for the rest of the flight.

Here we are some 500 miles from base with basically only dead reckoning as our means of navigation. We had been briefed we could expect instrument conditions at the base upon our return. This couples with the fact there were some 'foothills' some six miles past the base that rose to 23,000+ feet and we had mountain ridges to cross before getting to the base that would thwart any attempt to get under the clouds. We realized that we were in some kind of a predicament; sort'a like being up the proverbial creek without a paddle.

We had to assume our last known position was, in deed, when we were under attack, over the Jap staging base. Lynch, bless his heart, was most persistent in his contention that we were right on course. We knew, if worse came to worse, we could fly to a position thought to be just short of the base within a 200 mile circle and bail out.

It was when we were approximately 400 miles from base, we saw the first B-29 ahead of us since leaving the target area. It crossed our path at about a 25 degree angle and disappeared into the distance on our left. Some ten to fifteen minutes later the plane was closing on our course from the left. Due to all the zigzagging we had closed the gap between us to about four miles and using the Atlas lamp and the 'Q' signals, the returning blinks indicated the plane was on course. How could that be in the face of all the course changes we

had observed?

We maintained our course set by Bill Lynch while carefully observing the behavior of the other plane as it continued to veer to the left and right of ours. Some 50 miles after first establishing 'Q' contact, the gap between the planes had narrowed to the point we identified the plane was from our group and being flown by John Simpson and crew.

It was about this time we came to the conclusion that we had no recourse other than join up with Simpson and fly his wing back to base. Believe me when I say we didn't arrive at that decision easily, in view of the erratic course changes we had observed but frankly, we didn't have an alternative. We could easily see the cloud formation in front of us and realized that it wouldn't be long before we would be flying on instrument conditions. I knew we had to get tucked in close formation before hitting the clouds to have a chance of staying with Simpson on our descent and approach to base.

Now our future lay as much in my ability to keep us in close formation as it did with Simpson's ability to fly an instrument approach. I thank the Lord for all the practice I had experienced in formation flying single engine pursuit planes prior to getting into the multi-engine business. We had no way of knowing the weather conditions at the base, having no working radio of any kind. We had to put our full trust and faith in Simpson's ability to break the ceiling, whatever it was. There was no turning back.

There is no way that I can describe my emotions when Pinky Ballard first informed us he could see the ground when we broke out of the clouds at between 500 and 700 feet. We've made it! Now all we had to do was get that hunk of metal on the ground. We turned on the amber identification light as we made a pass over the field to let the folks below know we would be landing a slightly impaired aircraft; no radios, no main hydraulic system, 3 engines, and a fuselage

full of holes.

It was in debriefing that we learned what Simpson's zigzag course was all about. With his navigator wounded and unable to function, he had turned to a radio navigational aid as his principal means of navigation. This was the old four quadrant A-N low frequency radio range, located some 7 miles east of the base. He was bracketing the beam from some 400 miles out which accounted for all the zigzagging we observed as it takes a pretty swath of air to get from the A to the N side of the beam that far out.



A ground inspection of our plane revealed the presence of more than 300 holes in the fuselage and wings the size of a thumb or larger. In addition, there was a large gaping hole in the top of the rear bomb bay section where the aerial bomb hit. The force of the bomb had distorted the rear bomb bay doors and had popped rivets along the entire circumference of the planes fuselage in the area. The plane was never flown again but did serve as a source of cannibalized parts for other airplanes in the group.

Wrapping it up, there are a few other reflections that come to mind. The first was to drop some 'Navy' type bombs in a usable river next to Saigon at night. The second mission had me as a co-pilot aboard a flight to bomb Yawata, the first bombing mission on Japan by us from China. We flew the first bombing of Tokyo with fire bombs and finally the flight to drop fire bombs on Asahigawa, the last

northern city in Japan. On my trip to Asahigawa, the fellows on Saigon were keeping the radio buzzing about the missions that were going on that night. Japan was being told that our mission with fire bombs would be operating on up to 18 cities. While in flight, we were told to stop at Iwo Jima on our way to get some gas due to the length of our mission.



Having been nominated as lead pilot on all our 12 ship formations, I was selected for the first mission with fire bombs over Tokyo. There were two reasons I did not go on this mission. First, no leading aircraft was to be used. More important, Major Eberly who had been in charge of the Officers Club was told he, like the rest of us, would have to get in the 35 missions before he would be going home. He therefore decided he would take my place. Lucky for me, I didn't have to go on that flight. Major Eberly was one of the many killed on that mission.

Being without a flyable plane after being hit with an aerial bomb, my crew had to mark time in China while awaiting airlift back to India. My squadron commander, Joe Bailey, sent word that

he wanted me to return with Thompson and crew. This I did as Thompson's co-pilot. He elected to fly a direct course back to India, which was somewhat north of the course most of us took when flying over the 'hump'. This took us over some rather tall mountains, some of which were uncharted on the maps. We are flying along about 20,000 feet in the clear when in the distance I can see our course is going to take us into a small cloud buildup. We are just about to enter the cloud when I reached down and altered our course using the auto-pilot to fly to one side of it. Just as we came abreast of the cloud we could see a mountain peak in it above our flight level. Lucky, no way. To this day I swear that someone was looking out after me during my entire combat tour in B-29's.



Editor's Note: Colonel Childress flew 35 missions from India and China, receiving three Distinguished Flying Crosses, four Air Medals and one Silver Star.