

A ROYAL BUZZ JOB

Written by Howard Eppler
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Place: Chakulia, India Army Airfield

NOT MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN in the annals of the 40th Bomb Group about the adventures of ground crew personnel. Their stories may not be so dramatic, but it is readily acknowledged that they contributed much towards the war effort. It was they who kept the B-29s flying.

Those beautiful planes were very complex pieces of machinery. Where would one begin to describe what it took to "Keep 'em Flying"? There was no such thing as non-essential work. Every section had its own stories to tell about guns and bombs, typewriters and telephones, air frames and engines, Armament, Ordnance, Administration, Intelligence there seems to be no end to the list.

The planes sat out in the open with daily temperatures of 115o or higher. The duraluminum air frame was hot to work on and around. Hundreds of men were hospitalized during the "hot season" of May to July 1944 because they were unwisely working a normal 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. shift as their contribution toward winning the war. It became necessary to stop work on the big birds during the heat of the day, return to the hot and humid barracks during the heat of the day, then return to the line in the evening and work until midnight or later to maintain and repair the aircraft.

Lt. Col J. I. Cornett's B-29 named "Nippon Nipper" (42-6289) was being refueled the night of July 7, 1944. M/sgt Jake Belknap sent his mechanics to the mess hall for a midnight supper as the fueling process continued. When they returned to the beautiful plane they saw that the fuel tanks were overflowing and 100 octane gasoline covered the concrete hardstand. Jake ordered the men to get brooms and begin sweeping the fuel away to disperse it and help it to evaporate. I know, but will not mention the name of one mechanic who meant to hang an open bulb drop light on an antenna on the underside of the wing. The electric cord slipped from the antenna and the bulb crashed, igniting the gasoline. Very quickly the plane was afire and totally destroyed. Lt. Col. Cornett's signature was found on a recovered document certifying delivery of the plane. Its cost was over \$1,000,000.

Captain Hunter's olive drab colored B-29, "Bombin' Buggy" was parked on the adjacent hardstand. Seeing the mass of flames engulf "Nippon Nipper", M/sgt. Marvin (Red) Carmichael started an engine on 42-6250 and taxied it out of danger. He told me once that he wondered why he had done that - the plane caused him so many headaches.

The 40th Bomb Group ground crews remember rolling the tubular steel crew chief stands next to the engine nacelles to gain access to the massive 18-cylinder engines. The Wright R-3350 engines were developed from the Wright R-1820 engines that powered the B-17s. Two nine-cylinder R-1820s were combined, so to speak, to make the R-3350. The engines were enclosed in sheet metal cowling that had to be removed in sections if a mechanic was to work on the engine. An access door on either side of the engine nacelle could be removed so the mechanic could work on the accessory section..

There was a Royal Air Force fighter squadron based near the B-29 base. On several occasions as 40th Group ground crews worked on the planes, two British Hawker Hurricane fighters buzzed the dispersal area at tree-top level sending cowlings and other sheet metal flying. Some cowlings were damaged beyond repair. Everyone was very angry at this dangerous prank. One day a 40th Bomb Group pilot buzzed the tower of the RAF base at high speed. The mighty engines of the B-29 blew the Hawker airplanes around. That put a finish to the Royal Buzz Jobs.