

A VERY CLOSE CALL

Date of events: January 7th and 14th 1945

Locations: Over Szechuan, China and at Chakulia, India

Writer: Howard Eppler

IT WAS A SUNNY Sunday afternoon, January 7, 1945, as Major John Eigenmann guided his B-29, #582 toward the USAAF advance base A-1 at Hsingching, Szechuan, China. The flight over the magnificent Himalayan Mountains was uneventful. The flight crew was relaxed as the plane made its gentle long-range descent toward A-1. As it passed over another B-29 base south of A-1 Major Eigenmann leaned toward the cockpit window to count the B-29's of another Bomb Group that had already landed. The writer of the anecdote was standing on the nose wheel door between the two pilots, also gazing at the ground and counting the planes there. The alert Bombardier, Lt. Owen Donahue, was observing the sky ahead of us and spoke rather urgently to the Major. His only word was, "Major!" When the Major looked up, the bombardier pointed to a C-46 coming straight toward us at what seemed to be precisely nose to nose. He immediately put the B-29 into a steep turn to the right causing the crew members in the rear of the plane to tumble out of their seats. At precisely the same moment the C-46 pilot executed a similar steep turn to his right. It was a close call. The blast of the propellers of the C-46 could be felt as #582 made its turn. The B-29 landed safely at its destination and the flight crew and passengers made their way to the barracks and mess hall for a good supper. Those Chinese cooks always served good, tasty food.

A series of bombing missions were flown during the next few days and with the missions accomplished the 40th Bomb Group fleet returned to the base in Chakulia, India. The following weekend the planes were again laden with their dangerous cargo of bombs in preparation for another series of strikes at the Empire of Japan from the bases in China. When it was time to go, the engines of #582 were not running right and there was a problem with the instruments, among other things. Being delayed for the flight to A-1, the decision was handed down to unload the 450# clusters of anti-personnel bombs and replace them with practice bombs for a practice bombing mission to Halliday Island in the Bay of Bengal. As the unloading process was underway, that memorable, terrible explosion took place, killing several 44th Bomb Squadron personnel. B-29 number 42-63394 bearing the name "Last Resort" was sitting on the hardstand adjacent to #582 and was damaged beyond repair by the explosion. Every B-29 on the Chakulia base that Sunday morning, January 14, 1945, was damaged. But far worse than that was the tragic loss of our comrades.