

(From the memoirs of Col. Charles T. VanVliet)

Tinian

On our flight from Topeka in our brand new aircraft, we landed in California, Hawaii, Kwajalein, and finally at Tinian. Tinian, just a mile or so south of Saipan, was 1,500 miles from the Japanese empire.

We landed with our new B-29 to join the 40th Bomb Group. The 40th Bomb Group was one of the earliest B-29 outfits organized. They had been stationed in India, where they had to fly over the 'Hump' to a temporary airbase in China, refuel, and just have enough fuel to reach the southern part of the Japanese empire. Taking off from India required an immediate climb to over 5000 feet to clear mountains.

Because of the overheating problems on the early B-29, the pilots and engineers developed a system to dump the bomb loads quickly in the event of failure so that the pilots could clear the mountains. Normally the airplane's bomb bay doors would take about a minute and a half to open, operated by worm gears, and then switches would toggle the bombs out. There was an 'emergency' bomb release which would open the bomb bay doors on the first 18 inches of pull, then the second 18 inches of pull would open the bomb shackles and the bombs would drop out. The Indian based airplanes were modified so that the moment you pulled the Emergency release handle the bomb shackles were opened and the bombs fell right through the closed doors, so that it only took a few seconds to drop the whole bomb load, destroying the doors in the process.

As I mentioned earlier, after 30 days rest in Australia, the 40th Bomb Group was transferred to Tinian. They arrived a few weeks before I did; when I landed with my brand new B-29, I was greeted and shown a pile of tents and offered my pick. So we picked up a tent, pitched it, and that was our home. The airplane that I brought in was assigned to someone else, and I got one of the older 'Indian' B-29s. Upon inspection of its paperwork, I found it had an abysmal abort record...I imagined that we'd be stuck on Tinian a long, long time if we didn't do something about it. So we got to work and got our airplane in pretty good shape, and then started to fly missions.

As we started flying missions from Tinian to Japan, our average flight time back to Tinian was about 15.5 hours. We prepared for the missions by having a briefing the night before the mission, flew the mission, returned, and had about a day off for rest, then started the preparation for the next mission.



My 'house' on Tinian

Most of the pilots were eager to fly as many missions as soon as possible as we could go home after we had completed 35 missions. The

normal mission would be from Tinian up to Iwo Jima flying separately. Then from Iwo Jima we'd fly up to a point south of the Japanese empire, our pre initial point. This was where the B-29s would assemble in formation (if it was to be a formation mission) and we'd proceed from this point 50 miles or so to the initial point of the bomb run. From the initial point to the target, normally the bombardier would control the airplane's course from his bombsight. He would be checking the wind, and so forth, and would drop the bombs at the appropriate time.

The lead airplane would drop his bombs on the target first and all the other planes would then drop their bombs upon the lead airplane's release. Experience had proven that you got a better bomb pattern on the ground and thus a higher percentage of destruction of the target by following this procedure.

My first mission was flown as co-pilot with an experienced crew; I think the aircraft commander's name was Hank Lanzoni. As we approached Japan we started to get attacked by fighters and a plane in front of us was shot down. It happened to carry a guy that had gone through B-29 transition at Tucson with us. Once the bombs were dropped, everyone would peel off and head for home, flying near Iwo Jima and then on to Tinian.

At that time Iwo Jima was still held by the Japanese, and we would avoid it by flying 50 miles either side of it. We usually had 3 or 4 American submarines patrolling the area on our return course. These were called Dumbo submarines; if we were in trouble and had to ditch, we would make contact with the Dumbos and if they were in the

area they would pick us up.

I flew about 10 or 12 missions before I was designated to be lead bomber on a mission over Osaka, Japan. As we approached the pre IP and assembled our airplanes in formation, our procedure was to open the bomb bay doors at our convenience and get ready to be lined up on the initial point. The early B-29's bomb bay doors were operated by worm gears, and took about a minute and a half to open. I asked the bombardier if it was OK to open the doors and he said 'Sure', so I said 'I'll open them with the emergency switch and make sure that works.' I pulled the emergency switch and lo and behold the bombs were shackled right thru the bomb bay doors, and probably killed about 2 million pounds of fish! We had dropped about 40 miles away from the target!

Fortunately the following aircraft recognized that we were not over the target and they did not drop their bombs. When the bombs fell through the doors, Earl Bryant our young bombardier said, "Who the hell dropped my bombs?" I was sitting in the pilot's seat with the emergency release handle in my hand and as I looked at it from between the fuselage and the pedestal I noticed a red card fastened to the cable that read, "Warning this airplane has been modified." Of course it had been modified as previously described for the airplane stationed in India, but there was no record of this modification in the airplane records and the red slip had fallen down so it was completely out of sight and would not appear until somebody pulled the emergency release!

We were heart broken that we had traveled all this way and wasted our bombs. Nevertheless, the other airplanes' pilots were wise enough not to drop their bombs so we led the formation through on to the target. We had a pretty good bomb pattern because we got a 90% destruction rate on the target and the unit was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation as a result of our bombing accuracy. A thorough investigation of our problem revealed no fault on our part, so we did get credit for the mission.

Once our bombs were dropped and the bomb bay doors ruined, the drag of the open doors was such that we didn't have enough gasoline to get all the way home. Fortunately, by this time the Americans had captured Iwo Jima. We decided we would land at Iwo Jima even though it was in the process of having a runway built. We landed at Iwo Jima without problem and spent two days there until a C47 took us back to Tinian. After a few days our airplane came back to Tinian and we resumed our normal routine.

Bill Skaer was the 40th bomb group commander. He was a West Point graduate and a rather nice guy. Bill had a staff comprised of his Operations Officer, Intelligence Officer, Maintenance Officer, Administrative Officer and other specialties, of which Air Inspector was one. I was called to the group commander's office and told that I was going to become the Air Inspector.

Bill Skaer had a rule that his staff members could fly only one mission a month. This meant that, as I now had 13 missions and had to get to 35, I would have many more months to stay on Tinian. There was nothing I could do about it, however, so I became the Air Inspector. By the time I accrued some 14 missions to Japan from Tinian, we had credit for 4½ kills and enumerable holes in our airplane from flack and bullets.

I suppose that I made a name for myself, which resulted in my becoming Air Inspector, by innovating certain things. For example, on one occasion I returned from a mission nearly two hours after the other planes and was told that search parties were about to be sent out. I explained that I was merely practicing cruise control in order to conserve fuel. I believe that I arrived with a much greater reserve of fuel than any of the other planes did on that particular mission.

Tinian, essentially a rocky atoll, would have been great had it not been wartime. On the eastern side there were steep cliffs, in which the sea had eroded numerous caves. From the eastern shoreline the land rose to a height of maybe 200-300 feet in the middle of the island, then sloped down to a sandy beach on the west. I used to think what a wonderful resort it could be if it were not for the war. Most of the indigents, who had been captured when the island was invaded by the American forces, were gathered into a camp along the spine of the island. The odors that came from there were just terrible! We avoided the place whenever possible.

We had two fields on Tinian, the West Field, where I was stationed, and the North Field, which were separated by about a mile. As I mentioned earlier, Tinian was only about a mile and a half away from Saipan where there were additional B29 airfields. Enola Gay was launched from North Field, Tinian. That is the airplane that dropped the atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

No one knew very much about what went on, excepting that someone said 'Did you hear about the new type of bomb that they used on last night's raid? It was many,

many more times powerful than what we were able to deliver on our sorties.’ That was about the extent of the speculation at that time; as weeks went by, however, rumors began circulating that the Japanese were giving up and that General MacArthur would be signing a cessation of hostilities agreement with the Japanese very shortly.

Relishing this good news, we started to load our airplanes with all kinds of food and medicines and packed these things with parachutes to the extent that we could, which meant about one bomb bay of my airplane had food stuffs and medicines packed with parachutes. The other bomb bay was just foodstuffs and medicines with no parachutes.

We were to fly from Tinian to Okinawa, land and refuel, then proceed over the Korean peninsula to some P.O.W. camps in which some Americans were held prisoner. Once over the camps we were to drop the food and medicine to them. With huge American flags painted on the underside of our wings, we took off.

I landed at Okinawa and there was a great deal of traffic there, apparently in connection with the force being assembled to support MacArthur and his meeting with the Japanese on the battleship to effect cessation of hostilities.

At any rate we had to wait on Okinawa for a couple of hours before we got fueled. While we were walking around the revetment where we were parked, stretching our legs until the fuel truck came, a lone figure came walking by. He was an American; looked like a fighter jock, leather jacket and all. He walked over and greeted us and said ‘Hi, my name is Van Vliet’...I said ‘What?!’ It turned out his name was the same as mine, he was from somewhere in the Midwest – what a coincidence! Here we are half way around the world, and by chance I’d met another guy named Van Vliet!

We flew up over the P.O.W. camp, and buzzed it a couple of times, watching all of the prisoners waving their hands and jumping around with joy. We buzzed them two or three more times to give them the message to get out of the way so we could drop the cargo. Finally they understood and we dropped...the ones with parachutes didn’t fare badly, but the other cargo we had to drop short because of the lack of parachutes and unfortunately some of them hit the prisoner’s cook shack and set it on fire, and the food went bouncing and bounding all over the field and up against the fence! I don’t think the P.O.W.s really minded that one bit, though.

Back on Tinian, plans were being made to rotate people back to the States. My

turn came and I was assigned a B-29 to fly back home. Normally we had a crew of 11; I think I had 25 people aboard for this trip home, the extras were fighter pilots who had been based on Okinawa being rotated home.

We departed Tinian for Kwajalein in Hawaii, and stayed there overnight for crew rest. That's where we had our first wonderful meal of steak, potatoes and beer. Speaking of beer, we did some ingenious things while on Tinian. Every time a B-29 would go up for a test flight, we'd load the bomb bays with cases of beer. We would take the airplane up to 18,000 feet or so, fly around for an hour, and when we came down we had ice-cold beer! We thought that was pretty clever!

Another device that we complimented ourselves on took a little construction. We built an 'X' out of some scrap wood, and then screwed another piece of wood perpendicular to it. A metal 'crankshaft', with a wooden propeller affixed to the end, was inserted through a hole at the top of the vertical link. Before we'd go on a mission, we'd dump our dirty clothes into a clean oil drum with our contraption inserted into it. All we had to do was add water and shaved soap then align the rig so it would face the wind and turn the propeller. We'd take off on a mission, and when we got back, some 15 or 16 hours later, our clothes would be washed! We'd rinse them out with cold water and throw them up onto the sides of the Quonset huts, where they would stick until they dried and fell off.

