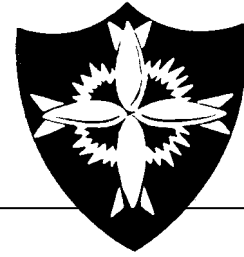


40th Bomb Group Association

MEMORIES



Date of event: 8 September, 1944
Date written: May, 1984
Written by: James Ira Cornett

INTRODUCTION

This is the first in a series of 40th Bomb Group MEMORIES that we will be publishing. The 40th was, perhaps, one of the least written about organizations in WWII. Yet, there are so many stories to be told that we feel we should do something about it ourselves. This first piece is by James Ira Cornett (Col. Ret.) who was, at the time of the event, CO of the 44th Squadron. As is noted in this MEMORY, Gen. LeMay had been told by Gen. Hap Arnold's office that he could make one B-29 mission. He elected to go on this one to Anshan. He had assumed command of the XX Bomber Command only 10 days earlier.

LEMAY FLIES TO ANSHAN WITH CORNETT

After the flight from our India base at Chakulia, B-29 #503 was maneuvered into an approach let-down for our China forward base at Chengtu. Neither the crew nor I were aware of an impending addition to our crew for the next day's bombing mission on September 8, 1944. Our experience was that added members always seemed to result in mechanical or flight problems which made mission performance more difficult. For this reason I resisted taking them.

Shortly after landing and parking the aircraft I was summoned by Col. "Butch" Blanchard, our group commander. On reporting to Butch, he passed me a message from XXth Bomber Command which essentially said: "Lt. Col. James I. Cornett is directed to take General LeMay on the forthcoming mission. He will not abort the take-off, nor the enroute flight. He will bomb the primary target and return General LeMay safely to the base of take-off."

I thought, "Jesus, what a dumb message! The airplane ought to read it." But I read it again, and an immediate negative reaction took hold of my senses. As a result, my ensuing conversation with Col. Blanchard went along the line of: "We have a four gun upper turret on our B-29 and there is little room for extra people." Butch said, "The General understands, and we're providing a folding chair for him." That elicited another brilliant excuse to resist. "Yes, but we don't have extra seat belts." Butch's comment shot that down with: "The General has already been briefed to take a ditching position during take-offs and landings. And furthermore when you're formation commander you always take an extra pilot anyway." I'm sure I had a couple of other excuses, but they were so weak I'm unable to remember them. Butch advised me that the Twentieth Air Force in Washington had agreed to let General LeMay make this one B-29 mission and they weren't about to lose him. Hence the message directive.

Perhaps my main concern was our general opinion of General LeMay which was based somewhat on rumors and scuttlebutt. We knew he was extremely knowledgeable in piloting, navigation, and bombing and we were aware of his successful operations in the European theater. We also were aware of the good things he'd done after assuming command of the XXth Bomber Command, which improved the B-29 operations and our lot in general. Yet I also believe that few of our people wanted to be physically close to him any longer than necessary. That damn message directive really screwed me up.

Butch advised me that our airplane would be the first in line for taxiing and take-off; that the General would already be briefed on emergency procedures, etc. I'd only have time to introduce him to my crew members after they brought him out to the aircraft. With that I excused myself and got my crew together to give them the news. They were super professional troops and didn't raise any issues. They probably suspected I'd already had my say anyway. I certainly wasn't concerned about them doing their job. It was just another mission to them with an added new wrinkle. Even our Flight Engineer (FE) F/O Richard V. Arrington, who always kept the machine flying, was unperturbed, but I suspect he made one last check of #503 anyway. Later, off to bed early; the message directive still bouncing around in my head.

Around midnight we were awakened, ate, and went to mission briefing. We were going to Anshan, Manchuria, to bomb the steel plant coke ovens in daylight. Our route, both out and inbound, had dog-legs supposedly to route us around anti-aircraft concentrations, or confuse the Japanese as to our full intentions. Ironically, the dog-leg turn-point always had an alert anti-aircraft battery in place judging from flak bursts we occasionally observed. And of course radio silence was doctrine until we came back across the Yellow River.

After proceeding to our aircraft, we had just finished our checks and I'd lined up the crew when General LeMay arrived. After crew introductions, the General's comment was "Pretty high ranking crew". Hell, most of them had been together for over two years: Puerto Rico; Panama; Guatemala; Pratt, Kansas; and now India with China flings, but I didn't comment. Besides the Co-Pilot, George S. Gaston III, was only a 1st Lt.; a Pratt joiner from B-17 school. The Flight Engineer, as mentioned previously, was a Flight Officer. Our Navigator, Bombardier, and Electronics Officer were Captains Donald G. Starkey, Glen McCutcheon, and Donald L. Stumpff, respectively. Of course, there were four T/Sgts. Radio Operator (RO) Otis M. Cox, Left Gunner, W.H. McConnell, Right Gunner, R.E. McMahan, and Tail Gunner A.D. Doran. The Central Fire Control (CFC) gunner was S/Sgt. R.C. Curtisa. Perhaps the General had a point. General LeMay then noted Stumpff was not wearing a wing badge, and queried that. As time was short, I stated we had to get aboard, but I would discuss it with him at the first opportunity, which I was anxious to do.

Number 503 must have read the message directive, as the take-off at 5:40 a.m. and climb-out were normal. We settled down to initial cruising altitude. General LeMay spent considerable time with the Navigator comparing terrain features with map portrayal. He talked with F/O Arlington, but little with me, except for the subject of Stumpff and his situation. I advised the General my original Electronics Officer had been grounded and Stumpff, who was our Squadron Electronics Officer, volunteered to take his place on missions. Although I'd tried to get Stumpff on flying status, the system wouldn't respond. Stumpff insisted on flying and I reluctantly agreed to let him, as he was needed. General LeMay listened attentively; but made little comment.

The mission into the target area was uneventful. But that changed rapidly. Flak was moderate, and the usual assortment of various types of Japanese fighters were seen past the

target area waiting for us, slightly higher than our altitude. Initially they would stay out of our gun range and perform simple aerobatic maneuvers, for what purpose I never learned. After we departed the I.P., the General turned to the navigator and asked him to observe where the bombs hit by looking through the drift meter. When we had dropped our bombs and were leaving the target area the fighters pressed their attack. Usually one pass was all they could make, but we never knew. While over the target we were hit with flak. The left waist gunner called and said the CFC gunner had been hit with flak and injured. Further interphone conversation revealed it was not too serious. Then Starkey called and said the RO was also hit. I turned to advise General LeMay of this but I couldn't see him. I hollered at Arrington, the FE, and asked, "Where the hell is the General?" Answer: "Grabbed a first-aid kit and took off." Then I noticed the General's parachute lying on the floor. My comment was, "Dammit Arrington, he didn't take his chute." Arrington chided me with the remark, "You know we carry an extra parachute in back." To get through the tube over the bomb bay was a neat trick without a parachute, more so with one. But it was not a good place to be while the cabins were pressurized and under attack. The loss of any gun sighting blister in the center cabin would have propelled whoever was in the tube to a fatal collision with the CFC gunner's seat stand. So I called back to the waist gunner and asked if the General was there. "Not yet," came the reply. Starkey, the Navigator, replied that LeMay had checked the RO. The flak vest was dented in places; but he wasn't cut. The General at the moment was on his way down the tube! Cabin pressure was falling, resulting from flak holes in the fuselage, so I set the engine turbo control pretty high to keep up cabin pressure. The waist gunner called and advised the General had showed, and was working on the CFC gunner. We still had gunners sufficient to handle the few fighters pestering us. Then things settled down somewhat. What few crises we had encountered seemed to be under control. After about an hour General LeMay returned to the forward cabin and immediately noted the high turbo setting and queried me on it. Seems like I made some comment about how we had run out of cheese sandwiches. That didn't go over very well, so I explained we used them to seal small flak holes in the fuselage. One of the crew members stuffed a rag in one flak hole using a screwdriver. The high turbo setting was taking care of the leakage we had.

After this I thought the return would be uneventful, as things were chugging along pretty well. Not so. The left waist gunner advised of impending disaster. Sure enough, my left wing man, E.O. Berry's plane, was turning into us. I pulled up slightly to avoid collision, then he leveled out and resumed position. We had not crossed the Yellow River so I could not communicate with Berry effectively. Shortly thereafter light signals were sent to us from Berry's B-29, but we were unable to make out the message. His aircraft started to leave the formation. We signaled back to Berry to stay in formation, but there was no further response. They took up a slightly different heading and left the formation. Starkey assured us that we were on course. Of course General LeMay was aware of the situation and told me to get on the radio and get them back in formation. I explained the Tactical Doctrine prevented radio communication until we had crossed the Yellow River; but if I was ordered to do so I would. He did not do so, but fumed over the situation. We later learned Berry had passed out as a result of amoebic dysentery problems and caused a temporary loss of control of the aircraft, and it had turned into us. The co-pilot had taken over, and being concerned with Berry's condition he had elected to cut across the dog-leg route on a direct heading to our China base. He believed it would reduce flying time and get medical attention for Berry sooner. Perhaps not a good decision, but at least he evaluated the situation and made one. They really didn't precede us by much, but who's to know.

Later the formation passed very close to a Japanese fighter base on our right. I recall General LeMay was frustrated because we had nothing left in the bomb bays to drop. Although numerous fighters were lined up on the ramp, we saw no action on their part. Had they elected, they could have taken off. But the few that could have gotten within our gun range would not have fared well. Just as well, I'd had enough problems for one mission and that damned message was still hanging over my head.

After a routine return and landing at Chengtu, General LeMay thanked the crew and departed. We had landed at 17:40. The mission had taken exactly 12 hours.

Several things happened that night though. I understand General LeMay stated the Japanese knew where we were going before we took off so there was no need for radio silence. Besides you can't control aircraft with light signals like a bunch of Navy rowboats. So the Tactical Doctrine was changed to permit formation control by radio communication.

Also a formation was sacrosanct and to General LeMay, for one to leave it as Berry's Co-Pilot had, was a Court Martial offense. However, under the circumstances he elected not to do so.

And Capt. Stumpff was placed on flying status.

I never learned all that went on between General LeMay and my crew during the mission. I do know that after it, they, to a man, believed he could do no wrong and they had only the highest admiration for him. As for me, I'd already had a high regard for his ability as a Commander, Leader, Tactician, and Specialist in several related fields, but now I had to include a pretty fine human being as well. At no time had he interfered with the operation of the aircraft or mission per se. And to this day I have not changed these personal opinions. I give General LeMay sole credit for making the B-29 the successful weapon it was designed to be. The B-29 "Enola Gay" and the A-Bomb may have ended the fracas sooner, but it would have been only a matter of time without it. At least that is one person's opinion; mine.

Footnotes to this story taken from comments by other crew members: Don Stumpff notes that he was first aid man for the rear of the ship. When he heard on the intercom that the CFC gunner was hit, he got his first aid kit and started to the gunner's station. He found LeMay already there. LeMay told him to go back to his station and he--LeMay--would take care of the wound. Earlier, LeMay asked Don why he couldn't take a different course into the target. Don replied that there was only one heading which would give accurate results if they had to bomb by radar. To this, LeMay replied, "You know more about it than I do, so run it as you wish." Incidentally, Don Stumpff notes that he never did receive flight pay.

Otis Cox says that, while they probably didn't know it was going to be LeMay travelling with them, they had been advised in Chakulia that they would have a passenger. Otis was asked to provide an extra intercom position and headset with a long cord for use on the flight deck. He completed the installation before leaving Chakulia.