



EDITORS' INTRODUCTION: In late February and March, 1944, the 40th Bomb Group, stationed at Pratt, Kansas, had a period of intense activity preparing the first combat B-29's to go overseas. Part of that story was told in Issue #11, in September 1986. The present issue has additional memories of that busy, chaotic time.

THE BATTLE OF KANSAS (Part 2)

By Louis E. Coira, Acting Group CO in February 1944 (written March 1983):

In about January 1944, Col. Parker was ordered on temporary duty to the U.K. to fly some combat missions for experience. All Group COs were, by edict, to have combat experience. Some weeks later I received word that Parker had been shot down over Germany and I was to continue as Acting Commander. The promised date of deployment, which (I believe) was February 1944, obviously could not be met because the B-29s simply were not available in numbers, nor were they ready for combat due to many modifications required. In the midst of all this confusion and bustle, Gen. H. H. Arnold paid us a visit, and I never saw so many people and agencies covering up their tracks and keeping out of Hap's way. However, the 40th didn't come up with any criticism that I became aware of.

No listing of recollections of the 40th BG would be complete without a summary of our major difficulties with those early B-29s. Our primary airplane difficulty was with the R-3350 engines. Oil would not reach the rocker arms and valves of the topmost cylinders to lubricate and cool them. As a result, we were plagued with broken valves dropping into the upper cylinders and beating the pistons and causing engine failures and fires. Our maintenance people tried to remedy the problem by "preoiling" the engines: i.e., forcing warm oil by high pressure into the rocker arm housings. Or they would remove the rocker arm covers and pack the rocker arms in oil solidified by dry ice. Both of these methods helped the problem somewhat, but at a big cost in time and effort. Compounding the problem of engine overheat was a faulty design of the engine baffles which resulted in poor cooling air to the rear bank of cylinders. The baffles were later redesigned and retrofitted in India under Col. Erik Nelson's and Capt. Vic Agather's supervision, but that was too late to help us at Pratt and enroute to India. Each B-29 going overseas was required to carry a spare engine in its bombbay, and we used many of them enroute to India.

Another major problem was the radar, which was late in production. The initial word was that our B-29s would depart Pratt with racks and wiring only: Group "A" parts. When our deployment was delayed, the word was that the radar unit and antenna would be installed prior to departure by an outside team. They did this almost as the aircraft were rolling down the runway on departure. And, of course, we had radomes blow off the aircraft. I recall having to "intercede" with Chick Koenig because he would not allow a team to work on his airplane the day before he was to depart Pratt. I believe these sets were the initial PPI scope radars to be installed ever, and we knew so little about them that Capt. Hilt, our Group Radar Officer, had to learn by experimentation during our flight to India in #6351. This, then, was the background of our surprising first raid on Japan: night, low-level, radar bombing!

Another problem we experienced was with the B-29 electrical system; specifically with the circuit breakers, which on occasion would pop open with little or no cause. I believe it was Maj. Wilkinson

who came home one day to Pratt with absolutely no functioning electrical system. The fix was to retrofit all B-29s with current limiters, or fuses. That seemed to end our problem.

I am sure that all crew members recall the necessity to remove the deicer boots in which effort they participated. While this chore was being accomplished, among others, we were visited by Gen. Orval Cook and a few others from the Air Materiel Command. During the morning of his visit, he told me how extremely pleased he was to see flight crews on top of the airplanes with tools helping the maintenance crews. I told him that they were working willingly to expedite our readiness for deployment. That same afternoon Gen. Cook returned to my office and voiced an opinion that our departure was being delayed because our crews didn't want to go overseas! I did not then, nor have I yet, figured out how a Lieutenant Colonel could tell a 4-star General that he was not only insulting, but full of crap and get away with it. I merely replied that overseas combat would be a relief from what we were experiencing at Pratt, in the Kansas winter, etc.

By Ira Matthews, a Pilot (written May 1982):

A labor disagreement of short duration occurred on a cold Sunday morning in early 1944 at Pratt AAF, Pratt, Kansas. The 40th Bombardment Group was working around the clock to meet General Hap Arnold's deadline to prepare its new B-29 bombers for departure to an unknown overseas destination. Most of us were spending a solid 18 hours daily on the flight line, seven days per week. The weather was atrocious with surface temperatures below zero, driving north winds and giant snow drifts across the parking ramp. Ours was not an easy task.

Assigned to the Group was a task force of Boeing factory personnel, several aircraft and engine experts from Wright Field and several dozen mechanics from the modification center of the Bechtel, McCone and Parsons Company, Birmingham, Alabama. Most of this contingent were from the deep south. The weather was a trying ordeal to them. We soon learned their union leader was unhappy about the assignment. He did not care for the weather (neither did we), the military chow (we ate the same food), the flight line clothing (we wore the same clothing), the lack of entertainment (Kansas was bone dry then); but above all, he disliked the forceful supervision he was receiving from one of our most experienced Non-Commissioned Officers, M/Sgt. Britton C. Vick. Knowing Vick well, most of us were aware that his heavy handed supervision was necessary to persuade the civilian mechanics to hop to.

Early on Sunday morning the union leader and his men came into the 45th Bombardment Squadron hangar. Sergeant Vick was already on the job directing the placement of jacks under a B-29. He was an imposing figure, tall, rawboned and stern faced. Patience was not one of his virtues. His nickname, used only behind his back, was The Big Hammer. Rumors were that he earned this title by dragging some unruly recruit behind a hanger and physically convincing him that Vick was literally the boss.

The union man was rather small and prone to whine as he talked. He came slowly toward Vick, trailed by a dozen or so of his crew. The Sergeant was engrossed with the jacking procedures and held a three foot jack handle in his right hand. The union leader informed Vick in a very low voice that he was calling a strike, because working conditions were not acceptable to him and his crew. He then raised his voice and demanded to see our Group Commander to explain his grievance. As soon as these words sunk in; Vick's face turned crimson. He ripped out a barrage of profanity, most of which was aimed at the union man's ancestors. Then he paused for breath. Raising the steel jack handle high, he bellowed, "I'm giving you bastards thirty seconds to get back to work. NOW MOVE! If you don't do what I say, here's what's going to happen to you." The massive right hand flung the jack handle to the concrete floor. It bounced to an impressive altitude and clattered to rest against the hanger wall. The hangar became deathly quiet. M/Sgt. Vick towered over the smaller man, his fists resting on his hips. There was a dreadful scowl on his face.

All the strikers became suddenly aware that they could be rather badly injured if they did not obey the NCO. The leader turned to his crew, muttered a few words that were not audible to Vlick; the crew then picked up their tool boxes and moved rapidly to their assigned jobs. The brief strike was ended. We would not hear the word strike again at Pratt AAF.

Excerpts from the 1944 diary of Harry Changnon, a Co-pilot:

Tuesday, 2/29/44, Leap Year Day. Got up at 0630 and had a light breakfast with Doc Lee Hall, then rode to Oklahoma City with Bob Haley and John Nordhagen. We picked up B-29 #308. After we fixed a couple leaks, we got back to Pratt at 1700. I only got to log one hour Co-pilot time. This ship is really swell. It is better modified than the others and has most of the radar already in it. We cruised at 225 mph all the way home. I really like it, but all four (4) engines have to be changed!

March 1st, a Wednesday, began "The Battle of Kansas" for our crew. We went down to the line at midnite to go to work on 308, which we will share with Capt. Charles Taylor and his crew. We helped the Crew Chief and the line crew take off the cowlings and props. We went over to eat breakfast at 0630 and then back to the line. We got the 1 and 2 cowlings and props off by noon. It was miserably cold working out there in the wind and fog. Glenn Landreth, and some other Airplane Commanders, had a showdown with Lt/Col Schaaf about who gets to fly the ships. He made a decision on which crews get preference. It appears we are on the 2nd team. The clique, composed of the men who had been on the "Rock", are in power. Landreth tried to made an issue of which pilots had the earliest serial numbers and rank, but it didn't work out. It also is rather clear that we will go overseas by ATC too...dammit! We will probably miss the first raid. Went to bed at 2100, but got back up to write the folks. Maybe I should phone them, if it isn't too late. Dick Mallory's plane came in tonite. It, too, needs all four engines changed.

I didn't write much in the diary for the next few days because we were so busy working on the line. We barely had time to eat and drag our weary bodies back to the rooms for sleep. On the 2nd, we worked from midnite till noon on the planes...outside in the cold and wind...there was a hell of a lot of griping, especially from those of us who won't get to fly our own planes overseas. On the 3rd, we got a break by being able to work inside the hangar from midnite until noon.

Macer and I went into Pratt in the afternoon to pick up our cleaning, and to go to the bus station to pick up a package of summer clothes that the folks had sent me. I did try to phone the folks to tell them that we are about to leave the States, but no one was home.

They restricted all personnel to the post tonite! It looks funny to see all the top ranking officers sleeping in the halls on cots. Those of us who had our rooms didn't have to give them up, which was nice.

On Saturday, we finished work on the plane in the hanger by changing the tires. Most of us are slightly confused on which day is which since working on the various shifts has mixed us up. We did some preliminary processing and paper work on Sunday. I went to bed at 1600 and slept all nite as we went on a different shift. On Monday, the 6th of March, Landreth, Macer, and I took it easy all day since the feather merchants took over the modification work on the plane. We played a lot of ping pong in the Ready Room, and some of the guys are getting pretty good. We are playing games for dimes and quarters now.

Had a lot of fun kidding Landreth and Seebach in the showers about having to live on the Base with us single men. We went to a corny movie in the afternoon, but did work on the plane in the

evening. The next day, we saw "Broadway Rhythm" which was a good movie. Then back to work on the plane some more. Have forgotten to mention that my fingers appear to be okay again after we thought we had frozen them into a bent condition a couple nites when we were out taking out the Phillips screws that held the rubber de-icer boots on the leading edge of the wings. There must have been a thousand of them.

On Thursday, March 9th, we got up by noon...then worked hard on 308 with Charley Taylor's crew, as we expect to be visited by Gen Hap Arnold. We drew some more equipment for overseas, including my 45 pistol.

On Friday, the 10th, I woke up to hear the band playing, so knew that Gen Arnold had arrived. He told us crew members that we would get a 7-day leave, so everyone pepped up. The planes are just not ready to leave yet, and a new departure date has been set. However, Landreth told me at noon that we are going to go by boat. What a low blow! We really had a big bitch session during the afternoon about the boat deal. It is really funny in some ways...some guys can't swim.

Most of us started to do a little packing. Earl Rishell, our Flight Engineer, sold Glenn and me swell leather bags that he had bought in Panama. I only had to pay five bucks for a beautiful big bag. It would cause a hernia to lift it when it is filled, but it does have straps to help hold the contents in place and support the handle. We went to a Squadron meeting in the evening which got out of hand when we all asked for our seven day leave that Arnold had mentioned. Oscar Schaaf couldn't keep some of the guys under control. There is bad news for Ira Matthews and Bob Haley who still haven't gotten their ships yet. Those of us who are going to travel by boat won't get any leave either. We stenciled some of our things to help identify them. That nite I damn near froze in my top bunk because we had loaned some of our blankets to those in the halls, and the big old coal stove in the center was turned down so low that the heat didn't get thru to some of us in the rooms.

By Robert L. Hall, CFC gunner (written August 1986):

In the early part of the winter, we gunners had too little to do. We couldn't get much B-29 flying experience--too few B-29's. Sometimes we found useful things to do: we took link trainer lessons, or stripped and reassembled machine guns, or went to the malfunction range to learn more about the guns. But we spent day after day playing the pinball machines and betting who could get the biggest score without a tilt. As I recall it, Al "Moose" Matulis was the informal champion, and we kidded him that he must have wasted his childhood in a pinball parlor.

Suddenly everything went to the opposite extreme, and we were busy day and night. Our ground crew personnel--except crew chiefs--shipped out to unknown destinations, and new B-29's started arriving on base, but they needed all kinds of modifications before they were ready for combat. The base became a beehive of activity. Abruptly, flight crews were thrown into around-the-clock work on B-29 engines; officers and men alike became greasemonkeys. I had been elaborately trained on the intricacies of the CFC system, but I felt like a worthless fool when I had to help change a collector ring. I guess that our crew chief, "Red" Carmichael, must have decided that the only useful thing I knew how to do was safety wiring, because, after a few days of fumbling around, I found myself doing that for hours on end in the bitter cold.

One day Lt. Frank Redler, armament officer, yanked me away for another assignment. He took Paul Bremen (another CFC gunner) and me to a hangar and showed us a large crate. This, he said, was a modification kit for converting a gun turret from 500 rounds per gun to 1000 rounds. We were to take it and install it in a plane on the line. Off went Lt. Redler, dashing to some other pressing matter. The crate had no directions, no labels. We had never seen the new 1000-round version of the turrets.

Paul and I spread parts on the floor and proceeded to try to solve a large three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle. I was pretty good on the theory of the CFC system and on its electronics, but it seemed to me that someone had manufactured a bunch of pieces that would almost but not quite fit together. Fortunately Paul Bremen was an "old man" (perhaps 35 or so) with lots of mechanical skill and experience. In his hands, parts fell together effortlessly--though they would send anyone else (namely me) into fits of swearing. We had to disassemble a turret in the plane and figure out how to reassemble it, substituting parts from the mod kit. Between us we eventually managed to solve the puzzle and have no parts left over, though it took us a few very long days working in a very cold airplane. Without Paul's deft touch, I think I'd still be in Pratt, Kansas, trying to reassemble that turret. Though I hated to be separated from my flight crew, I have to confess that it was a relief to be rescued from engine work under that harsh task master, Red Carmichael.

One clear memory is the time Paul and I took a 10-minute break to thaw our frozen fingers in the hangar, while studying a couple of parts whose function eluded us. A B-17 taxied in, and a group in summer uniforms piled out into snow and gale and ran past us into the hangar, shivering. One asked us, "My God, does the wind blow this way all the time in Kansas?" Without hesitation, Paul answered in his Kansas drawl, "No, sometimes it turns around and blows the other way." I don't believe he even looked up from studying the turret parts, though I did detect a flicker of a smile.

By Ferriss Albers, Radar Operator (written about Summer 1986):

We had only a few days remaining in the states when we got our ship. We got our engines changed, had one test hop slow-timing, a hop to calibrate our airspeed meters, and a longer one to test our cabin pressurization and navigation equipment, and we were nearly ready, although we didn't know it.

General "Hap" Arnold (then four star) arrived at the field one day with a bustling retinue of three, two, and one-star subordinates and gathered about ten crews of us together in the Group War Room. We were to be the first crews flying B-29's to go overseas; he told us the eyes of the world were upon us. He made quite a picture standing there before a large map of the world, our vigorous, white-haired general, and I was duly impressed with the gravity of the situation. Then the general began asking pilots and copilots how many hours they had had in their new ships and if they felt ready to go into combat. The answers were mostly the fawning variety, professing immediate readiness, but I was surprised and gratified when Brownie, my copilot, 2nd Lt. Fountain L. Brown on his identification card, arose and fearlessly told the four stars that he thought we needed at least another two weeks before leaving. Well, of course, this remonstrance had no effect but at least it kept the party from degenerating into a mutual backslapping and showed that some men in the outfit were not bereft of their common sense by the drama and pageantry of the situation.

Heartened by Brownie's temerity, I got up when the floor was thrown open, my heart beating like a Wagnerian kettledrum, and asked the great man what hope the radar operator had of getting some training before going into combat, since rumors had it that at least half of our bombing was to be done by radar. Hap didn't like the question and brusquely answered that he'd refer me to General Saunders ("Blondie") for that information. He might as well have said President Roosevelt for all the answer meant to me. After suitable exhortations to keep our mouths shut about our destination (we didn't know it) and do our durndest, etc., Hap turned suddenly to our Group CO and said, "I want all these men to have seven days furlough before they leave." This created quite a stir, and the procession of generals left the room while we stood in astonishment. Our Group CO was astonished, too, since he must have had orders to have us on our way overseas within the week. [Editors' note: The Group CO later "requested" that we ask for three days, which was the outcome for nearly everyone.]

Editors' Postscript: The Editors of MEMORIES invite you to submit your memories about experiences in the 40th Bombardment Group--any story you believe worth telling. Right now we are seeking memories especially about three widely separated experiences in the Group: flying patrols from "The Rock," the flight overseas from Kansas to India in those early B-29s with lots of maintenance problems, and the flights to drop supplies to Prisoners of War immediately after the end of hostilities in the Pacific. These three span most of the history of the Group. Please send your recollections of any of these to the Editors: William A. Rooney and Robert L. Hall, 517 ½ Ridge Road, Wilmette, IL 60091.

Other officers of the Association include M. E. Carmichael, Treasurer, 2514 Oregon Avenue, Alamogordo, NM 88310, in case you wish to send a monetary contribution, and Harry Changnon, Group Historian, 10455 Westacres Drive, Cupertino, CA 95014, in case you have records of your military experience to share.



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