



Date of event: 15 June, 1944

Date written: 1944, 1987, 1989

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Editor's Introduction: The first Yawata mission sums up what we were in the Air Force to do--bomb Japan. On 15 June, 1944, 20 planes of the 40th took off from A-1 (Hsinching) for this purpose. Here is the story of this mission as told by six members of Bill Hunter's crew. The 1944 parts of the story are taken from logs and diaries that members of the crew kept. Other crew members reached back into their memories in 1987 and 1989 to tell the complete story.

YAWATA: FIRST LAND-BASED BOMBING OF JAPAN

Memories of Fountain L. Brown, Co-Pilot (Written 1987): Our crew spent 14 June at Hsinching, working on our plane while tension mounted. Rumors that the mission would be something special were strengthened when Generals Wolfe, Saunders, Stillwell and Stratemeyer were seen on the base. We guessed that they wanted a ringside seat to watch the B-29s complete a history-making combat mission.

On 15 June, 1944, we departed Hsinching, China, bombed the Imperial Iron and Steel Works, Yawata, Japan, and returned to Hsinching the following morning. Our crew flew one of the 20 aircraft of the 40th Group that formed the first B-29 strike against the Japanese homeland. The importance of that mission was sufficient to draw 11 general officers and numerous war correspondents to A-1. The VIPs witnessed the takeoff and landing of the B-29s. Not that the bombing results were that good. But the Yawata mission was the beginning of the end for Japan. That made the mission one of the great historic events of WW II.

From the 1944 Diary of Jerry W. Noble, Flight Engineer: Thursday, June 15 was the big day. Briefed at 0900 when we found out that our target was in Japan, you could have knocked us over with a feather. Some parts of the briefing were rather funny. They said maybe you'll run into fighter planes and maybe you'll run into flak. Nothing definite, so we really didn't know what to expect. Ate dinner, rested a while, then went back to the airplane for last-minute preparations and to sweat out takeoff. Things were easy before takeoff. No strained atmosphere. Everyone made a last check of their special equipment, and we still had about an hour before takeoff. Took stations at 1630, took off at 1645, and set course for Japan at 10,000 feet. We were the 12th ship to take off, but we passed about three ships before dark. Passed over some enemy territory before we reached the coast of China, but we were told the 14th Air Force had neutralized the airfields in that vicinity. On out over the water and on to Japan. As we neared the Initial Point, we all put on full battle dress-Mae West, parachute, flak vest, and flak helmet. Frankly, we were all pretty scared. We didn't know what to expect, and I think we were all expecting hell to break loose any minute. We turned into the target run, and as soon as we got to the mainland, searchlights started hunting for us. None of them could get us, though, because Mac (Frank McKinney) was doing some pretty good evasive action. We were at 14,000 feet true altitude. There was a little flak, but most of it was below and behind us. Bombs were away at 2230, and we peeled off and got the hell out of there.

The trip back was uneventful. We didn't see any fighters at all. Our gunners didn't fire a shot. Got back to base at about 0620 on the 16th after flying 13 hours and 35 minutes. Our longest hop to date.

Memories of Ferris A. Albers, Radar Operator (Written 1948, based on journal notes from 1944): We took off from India with a full bomb and gas load and made the Hump without incident. Arriving in China, we had to land with our bombs and a lot of gas. Hunter managed a fine landing; no damage was apparent. By the next day excitement was at a high level. All of the brass from the B-29 project were on base as well as many correspondents jauntily walking around. We eagerly awaited the general briefing scheduled the next morning.

A general briefing consisted of instructions to the crews given by each section: Intelligence, Operations, Navigation, Bombardment, Radar, Radio, Weather, Gunnery. The head of each unit described the mission from his standpoint, and then we broke into groups of specialists for special briefings. We sat by crew in the war room and answered roll call. The large map on the front wall was covered. After the roll call a deep hush fell over us as Major Louis Scherck from Intelligence got up to start things off. The cloth was drawn from the map, and there before our startled eyes stretched a skein of red yarn from our base eastward to the China coast, across the Yellow Sea, under the Korean Peninsula to Japan. As I look back, I cannot see how we could have expected anything else, but we were unanimous in our astonishment. I guess we had expected a less ambitious mission; it turned out to be a daring beyond our wildest imaginings. The round trip would be nearly 3,000 miles, four or five hours longer than our Bangkok mission. Our target was the steel works at Yawata; our IP, Okino Island; our course; our altitude, etc. Somehow I soaked up most of the deluge of information in kind of a stupor. General Wolfe gave us a pep talk; Father Adler said a lengthy benediction over us, and Extreme Unction was announced for the Catholics. Then we went to special briefing for the necessary radar information, and finally, we drifted out into the daylight and headed soberly toward our ships. The crew was doled out escape and evasion equipment, including very pretty waterproof silk maps of Japan.

It was our first combat mission, and we felt this strongly--each man wondering how he would stack up when enemy flak and fighters let loose on us, each responsible for a technical task under the distracting conditions of actual warfare. It was enough to take the bounce out of us, and it was a grave group that gathered beside the ship jumpily awaiting the appointed hour. The blue-clad Chinese guard assigned to our ship was chased away when curiosity brought him near the edge of our tense circle. The long hour of waiting finally ended, and we scrambled into the ship, glad to be kept busy. Takeoff was timed so we would arrive back at base early in the morning, which meant we would bomb at night. All our ships got off safely, and we settled down on the long flight to Japan, which had not been bombed since Jimmy Doolittle's carrier-launched B-25 raid over a year earlier.

After takeoff, the few hours of daylight left provided us with our first glimpses of the part of China between our base and the coast. We soon left the fertile fields and terraced hills of Szechwan and flew in the direction taken by the great Yangtze. As the sun set, I remember one of the gunners striking up the song, "How I hate to see that evening sun go down." We all knew what he meant and were thinking it would be a long time until the sun rose again, and we would still be flying, we hoped. It became very dark. With no moon and no aircraft lights, any little flicker on the ground stood out plainly. On the radar set in this plane, I had almost a 50-mile range, which was very good at the time. In the early part of the trip, radar was not of much use because the terrain was mostly mountains. In fact maps were not of much use either because they weren't accurate. A few hours later we entered a region of lower land and large lakes. The water and land contrasts were much better places for the operation of the kind of radar we carried. Still we found it not too useful since the water in the lakes and rivers of this area varied in level some 30 feet in different seasons, which changed the shapes of the shorelines. We could identify some lakes, and the strange-sounding names have remained fresh in my memory--Poyang, Tungting, and Hungtze.

When we arrived at the coast, with a good radar shot of the coastline and some star shots by the navigator, we had a very good idea of our course. I had never appreciated the dimensions of the Yellow Sea, the stretch of water between China and Japan. Every now and then on our way to the target the Flight Engineer had to transfer gas from the bomb bays into the wing tanks, i.e., he had to if he was smart. If the gas we burned made enough room in the wing tanks to take all out of the extra tanks, it was good to get the transferring done as early as possible because we could only use the gas in the wing tanks and frequently fuel transfer systems went bad or got bunged up on the bomb run. It was a real tragedy to get caught with gas in your bomb bay tanks which you were unable to use because the transfer system wouldn't work. And this often happened.

As we left the China coast, Noble called and asked me to shut off the radar set so he could transfer fuel. We had to shut it off because transferring the gas caused fumes in the bomb bays, and the antenna unit of the radar set was mounted right under the valves of the transfer system. The antenna of the Q-13 had a mechanism attached to it which whirled it around and tilted it up or down as controlled by the radar man. The gears in the unit were open, and they might throw a spark and ignite gas fumes. Hence the shutdown. The system pumped 30 gallons a minute on the ground, but high altitude reduced its capacity severely, so transferring a few hundred gallons was a slow process. This clash of necessities was to dog radar men continually. I was particularly reluctant to shut off the set since once we had one working in those early days, we hated to shut it off for fear something would go wrong in the interval. Also the next land we were to come to was Saishu Island, just south of Korea, and our best chance of finding it would be with radar. I was fearful that I would not get it running in time to do the job.

As the long minutes passed I grew increasingly fretful, although I said nothing except an occasional inquiry to Noble over interphone about the progress of fuel transfer. At last he gave the word that the fuel was transferred, and I hastily began turning on the set. In those days turning on the Q-13 was quite a complicated process that consumed several minutes and demanded critical adjustments. Even with all the required hocus-pocus, we were seldom certain of the results. Sometimes the moving line on the scope would when turned on, fail to be in synchronization with the turning of the antenna, and indications would jump around on the scope, and the small gears in the rear of the scope would grind and clash with a violence which threatened such delicate machinery. At such times the radar operator took refuge in his only hope--prayer. However, this time I had no serious trouble and with great deliberations the set warmed up and began to show returns. Almost at once there appeared on the scope a substantial land mass, and for a few seconds I was thoroughly confused. By switching to different ranges I was able to get a picture of the surrounding area, and much to my surprise, found it to be Saishu itself, a scant three or four miles ahead of us and directly on course. According to our calculations it should have been at least 50 miles away. I barely had time to call the pilot to ask if he wanted to fly directly over the island. He did not, so we did a rather violent bank and dipped just under it to the south. Jellis (the Navigator) was somewhat disturbed by this sudden change in course, and I guess such maneuvers did throw off the navigator's delicate calculations.

After passing Saishu without incident we were to go between two islands in the Korean Straits. Since there was only water beneath us, there was nothing showing on my scope, and I was content to sit and watch until the island crept onto the edge of my scope. Trying to save weight in designing the set, the engineers had used air as an insulator, or dielectric, between the various electrical components. At higher altitudes the air, being much thinner, was not as good an insulator, so to combat this we had pressurized certain parts in the RF unit out in the bomb bay. The extreme cold at high altitudes sometimes froze the rubber gaskets, causing them to shrivel and leak. If we lost pressure, we lost insulation and frequently high voltages "arcing over" would trip a cutoff and shut off the transmitter, but the rest of the set might continue functioning so that everything looked all right. At this particular time, I wasn't expecting any indications until the islands showed up so I did not notice that my transmitter had kicked off. The time arrived when the two islands should be showing up, and there was nothing, I tried to comfort Jellis, but I was getting upset myself when my eye suddenly fell on the transmitter current meter. With a wild sweep of my arm I punched the transmitter ON button,

and almost immediately the outskirts of the Japanese empire appeared. We were directly over the two islands by which we were to judge our arrival at the IP. We were heading northeast, probably about 50 or 55 degrees. Having had little experience turning an aircraft so that its position over the earth would be where you wanted it after the turn, I reached a quick agreement with Jellis. We agreed on the identification of the two islands (he had an auxiliary scope), and I asked him to give the pilot the turn signal at the proper time, so that when we came out of the turn we'd be on the course line running from our IP to the target. This was no mean feat to perform since, once into a turn, we were committed. The radar scope indications became so distorted during even a shallow turn as to be quite useless. You just had to sit and wait until the ship leveled out to see how close your judgment had been. The procedure involved simply asking the pilot to turn from the present heading to a new one you gave him. He would begin the turn, watch his magnetic compass till the desired heading was reached and then level out. This time we turned from a heading of 55 or 60 to about 140 degrees, if I remember correctly--nearly a right-angle turn. Jellis did a good job, and we came out right over the IP, Okino Island, headed at our target some 60 or 80 miles away.

The ship had been trimmed previously, and the final turn had been made on autopilot, so when we came out on course, Hunter told Mac it was all his. Mac took over with the bomb sight, but it was so dark he couldn't see anything. We had hoped that there might be fires burning from the bombs of ships which had preceded us, but there were no fires. (According to best available later information, we were one of the first, if not the very first, B-29 to attack.) After receiving control of the ship from Hunter, Mac called back to me that it looked like it was going to have to be a radar show and asked me if I had spotted the target. At that time, I had located the general area of the steel mill some 40 or 50 miles away. We were not high (around 18,000 feet, I believe), but we were making a true air speed of 250 mph or so and had a tail wind (as always from that direction) in excess of a hundred knots. This made our ground speed well over 350 mph. Today (1948) this speed does not seem so staggering, but back in 1944, it was extraordinary for a bomber. The short 60 or so miles of the bomb run did not last long at that speed, though after the flak began to come up, there were moments in which it seemed very long.

As we neared the island of Kyushu, the southern and westernmost island of Japan, bursts of bright orange flak appeared. I was back in the "dark room" and did not see it, but from interphone talk, I got a picture of what went on. To Mac, sitting out in the unprotected glass nose, the scene must have been really impressive. He began doing evasive action, i.e., putting the ship into twisting turns in an attempt to disturb the aim of the ground guns. Of course, during each turn my scope became useless, and soon Mac was making a new turn as quick as he came out of an old one. When he called back to ask where the target was, I told him he'd have to level out before I could see, so for a moment we levelled out, but again went into wild turns. Somewhat confused by these unexpected difficulties, I was not as vehement as I should have been about leveling out. Mac and I had not worked together enough for an understanding of each other's tasks, and he did not realize that he was fouling me up with his turns, and my remonstrance on the bomb run had little effect. Then, too, our great speed left little time for fine adjustments. We were all in a state of high excitement. An enemy was shooting at us for the first time in our lives, and the performance of our technical tasks had never presented so many difficulties.

Although time was short, I vividly remember a few moments of reflection on my years of training and how they would find their first justification in my actions now. I did not fear; there was no time. There was only the swift rush of time in this strange and unnatural situation. I recall it all as if had been a dream. There was the same disembodiment from reality, the same feeling that soon you would awaken and all would be well. But soon I was uncomfortably aware that things were not going well. I knew about how long the run to the target should have taken, and we did not level out until it was just about gone. When we did, we were naturally quite badly off course. As something resembling the target area passed beneath us, I hit my bomb release switch, and I cried, "Bombs away" to my own and everyone else's great relief. Hunter immediately took over manual control of the ship, and we turned sharply about to the left to get out of the flak area.

[The following paragraph was added by the author in February, 1989]: I remember vividly that after some interphone talk between me and Mac, Hunter broke in and said flatly, "Level out, Mac." After bombs away, Jellis told me quietly over interphone that when we dropped, our heading had been 360 degrees. Our briefed course from the IP had been 120 or so.

We headed back gladly. Our course took us over the southern part of Korea, but we were too relieved at getting away from Japan to worry about Korea. #297 was faster than most B-29s, and Hunter had crowded her most of the way, indicating 220 or a bit more, while most pilots cruised at 190 or 200. Such speed caused us to get back to base about 6 a.m. before anyone was ready to greet us. On landing, Hunter's actions expressed our mutual feelings when, after the nose wheel settled and began rattling over the bumps of the runway, he flung his arms into the air with a sigh of relief while we were still going 80 or 90 miles per hour. I had crawled through the tunnel to be in front for landing. As we piled out, we were greeted by just one man--our squadron operations officer--who was only partly dressed, as he rushed from sound sleep when the tower notified him we were landing. We got back an hour earlier than the next ship and nearly two hours ahead of some. Our speed had proved to be our own undoing since the base was fully awake by the time the second ship back arrived, and someone took motion pictures of generals greeting that crew. It didn't seem to matter to anyone except us that we had really been the first crew back.

In the general elation over the first land-based air attack on Japan, the fact that the target remained unscathed was quietly ignored. Nobody had come within a mile of the steel works. We had not been properly prepared. Our maps and charts had been ten-year-plans of the original plant as laid out by its American engineers. The difficulties of radar bombing under combat conditions had not been foreseen. We did no damage to the steel industry, but we learned a great deal for future use, both about bombing and about our ships. It is quite probable that we bombed civilian residences; many of our bombs must have gone two or three miles wild. The Japs claimed the next day that we'd killed 500 innocent children by bombing their school house, but as the time had been near midnight, we were not given to believing this statement. One comfortable thing about fighting the war from a bomber was that if all went well with you, you were never around to behold the carnage and destruction you caused. At least, if you saw your bombs hit, you were usually four to five miles away from the point of impact and able to maintain an objective outlook on the whole thing. For us, bombing represented only a challenging problem to be solved from above the clouds.

We all felt better after our first mission. Even though it had not been a success from a strictly bombing standpoint, it was a tremendous morale factor to know that Japan was within our reach at last. On arriving back in India after spending the day of our return in China, we found that the crews that had been on the mission were to have three-day passes to Calcutta. Only 12 ships from our group made the mission, so we were unique as men who had bombed Japan. We needed a pay advance and went to the finance office to get it. The place (like all finance offices) had always been a frozen-face joint whose select workers made you feel as if they were doing you a big favor in getting your money, so we were prepared for a rhubarb. We were somewhat disappointed, for when they learned that we were one of the crews just back from the big mission, people began trampling each other to serve us. No favor was too great. That night we left for Calcutta.

Memories of Frank W. McKinney, Bombardier (written 1989): The maps we had of Japan were just about worthless. I had a difficult time trying to determine where even Yawata was, much less the coke ovens that were our aiming point. If I recall correctly, after this mission, a project was started to map all of Japan by means of aerial photography.

Sitting in the nose of the plane with such a terrific view was scary. The tracer shells fired at us reached far above us. I just knew we were going to fly into one or into a burst of flak. I wondered how I ever ended up in a B-29 dropping bombs over Japan. I am sure reports were right about the poor results. I was never too sure that I had the right target in my bomb sight, but it was a great feeling to be dropping bombs on the Japs. Although we were familiar with searchlights, we had never encountered one in flight. The Japs caught us with one, and I remember the eerie feeling. I think it almost blinded us, and I recall the tail gunner declaring over intercom that he couldn't see anything. I think Hunter did a little evasive action to get us out of the terrific glare.

All the excitement--bombing Japan, tracers, flak, searchlights, difficulty in locating the target, etc. made it a hair-raising experience, and it was a relief to head back toward A-1. I have always believed, and still do, that we were the first B-29 to bomb Japan that night.

From the 1944 diary of William A. Hunter, Pilot (15 and 16 June, 1944): Yawata, late afternoon takeoff, bomb individually night radar, lots of flak and searchlights. After we left the target, the Tail Gunner requested we descend and depressurize so he could come out of his confined quarters. Seems as though he had forgotten to take his "emergency can" aboard prior to takeoff. When one has to go--one has to--even if this is a real important mission--first over Japan since Doolittle. Especially aggravated by being scared and forced to eat "other people's cooking." Being the resourceful man that he was, he used his flak helmet in the emergency. When searchlights started beaming, flak flying, he was reminded to put his helmet on. Oops! He forgot. Only pride was hurt. Crew welcomed him up front like a "skunk at a picnic."

Memories of Robert L. Hall, CFC Gunner (Written February 1989): When we took off for China on June 13 with lots of gasoline and bombs, I had heard vaguely that we were scheduled for a bombing mission out of China, but did not know more than that. The activity at A-1 in China made it clear that something big was going on. There were too many generals around the base and lots of other strange faces. When we went to briefing, I saw newsmen all over the place outside the briefing room, and that is when it struck me. I turned to one of the newsmen and said, "If all you guys are here, there must be something important going on." He glanced at me, said, "It looks like it," and walked away. Perhaps he knew more than I did.

Inside the briefing room, there was a big sheet of brown paper over the maps at the front of the room. Someone told us to look at the persons on our left and right, and if we did not know them, raise a hand. Security precautions. After everyone was identified, they uncovered the map, and there was an audible gasp--a piece of yarn marked the course, eastward across China, across the Yellow Sea, to Japan. So this was what we had been training for. The time had come. I felt worried, but more about whether the plane could make it there and back than about enemy action.

As the briefing proceeded, enemy action became more of a concern: we'd be within range of all kinds of ground fire, but there would not be enough fuel to climb higher. As I recall, things went smoothly through pre-flight checks, startup, taxi and takeoff, though those heavy takeoffs were always sweat jobs. I do not remember a lot of details about the flight out, except that I was very careful to do as I was trained--for example, reminding the gunners early in the mission to turn on auxiliary power, then AC power, and finally, as we neared the target the turret power.

It was dark over Japan. I strained my eyes staring into the darkness, but saw no other plane. As we neared the target, we saw searchlights and tracers from automatic weapons fire. There was discussion among the pilot, radar operator and bombardier, as they tried to locate the target. Finally the bombardier said he thought he could see the glow of the blast furnaces. On the bomb run we had automatic weapons fire and anti-aircraft bursts, but not very close to us. Still no other planes. The strangeness of everything and the uncertainty about what to expect were hard on the nerves. Thoughts raced through my mind. I was scared, but no worse than the time we nearly ditched our plane in the stormy Atlantic at night, and no worse than the time we were making a very heavy takeoff and kicked up dust at the end of the runway before lifting off. Maybe, I thought, combat would be no worse than other things we had experienced--and survived. But what had ever possessed me to volunteer for B-29 flying? I must have been crazy.

After bombs away, we turned toward home base, and I felt a sense of relief. That could have been much worse, I thought. Of course, I did not know then that it would be a lot worse on later missions. The trip home was a test of endurance. I'd had little or no sleep before the mission, and we had been flying all night. Exhausted, I struggled to keep alert and watch for other planes. On later missions the flight surgeon issued packets of benzedrine sulfate tables to help us keep awake, but on this one I had nothing to help, and I was struggling to keep my eyes open. Fortunately, we never saw a fighter plane or fired a shot on the whole mission.

When we finally landed, we were whisked by truck into operations for interrogation, but none of the newsmen paid any attention to us. Later I learned that we were the first plane to return after completing the mission and probably the first plane to drop bombs that night. A few planes had aborted and returned early, and they thought we were another of those. Once we had landed safely, I had a feeling of excitement and elation, along with exhaustion. We had succeeded in bombing Japan! It was a big step in the war effort. We had shown the Japs that their homeland was vulnerable. Of course, when the results were known, our whole group did not do a very good job of bombing that night. On later missions we would do a lot better, but so would the Japanese opposing us. However, the psychological effect of the raid had real military importance: it forced the Japanese to keep more planes and troops at home for defense, so we indirectly helped the soldiers and marines on various Pacific islands. And at the same time that we were flying this mission, American troops were landing on Saipan Island.

Footnote: Following is a list of the members of the crew who flew this mission'

William A. Hunter	A/C
Fountain L. Brown	CP
Frank McKinney	B
Leonard Jellis Jr.	N
Jerry W. Noble	FE
Fred E. Brooks	Radio
Ferris A. Albers	Radar
Robert L. Hall	CFC
Arthur C. Denny	RG
Robert L. Tepper	LG
Harrell E. Moore	TG



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