



Two Missions from Tinian-with some Introductory Discourse

Editor's Introduction: Time served and the level of hardship of the duty were probably the criteria for a soldier's measurement of glory. ("Mister, I've worn out more barracks bags than you have socks.") Duty could be used to set one apart or probably offer some opportunity to exclude the unqualified (as is the case with the college sorority or fraternity). In the 40th there were several opportunities to gain exclusivity. Having done duty on the "Rock" was the first and best. On arrival in India, those who were there early enough to have lived in "the old area" had that as their cachet. Ultimately, new arrivals on Tinian were treated with less respect because they "hadn't been there." "Been there" could mean anything from Panama to India to China---or Japan via a combat mission. (Dick Veach and his crew had the last laugh on this as will be covered.)

Another phenomenon to test newly arrived combat crews was the issue of "their plane." Crews were formed and trained in the States, then given a plane to fly to the Combat Zone. With virtually every crew, the plane assigned to them to fly to India or Tinian was regarded as "their" plane. It was an integral part of the crew. It was the instrument given them with which to fight the war. En route to combat, they came to know the plane and its foibles. They harnessed these foibles and made the plane their fighting instrument. Only upon taxiing up to the hardstand and disembarking from the plane did the crew learn that the plane wasn't theirs. In fact, they perhaps never saw it again or got to fly a mission in it. There was one exception. Jim O'Keefe recounts the story. John Child's crew brought their plane to Tinian and were immediately separated from it with the plane being turned over to George Weschler's crew (of which Jim was a member). Jim remembers at the time how indifferently the new crew dealt with the matter of the loss of "their plane." It was not until the Anaheim reunion (1982), however, that Jim learned the reason. When the plane was issued to Child's crew, they found it to be so defective that the crew went to base operations and told the operations officer that they would not take the plane into combat. The operations officer, in turn, told the crew that they would fly the plane to Tinian or they would be court-martialed, so the crew dutifully flew the plane to Tinian and surrendered it with a minimum of protest.

On the matter of the "Rock," Jim O'Keefe has a story to tell. This was written in the late 1980s and is printed here with Jim's permission.

The Rock

In October, 1943, I settled into the patterns of life at Pratt. I flew training missions, attended classroom lectures and met the men with whom I was to go overseas. As I came to know my squadron-mates and learn something about their backgrounds, I was able to sort them into groups.

The largest of these groups was composed of veterans who had patrolled the Caribbean and Pacific approaches to the Panama Canal. Another group (of which I was a member) was made up of pink-cheeked recent graduates of training schools.

Our group listened respectfully to the stories told by the veterans hoping to learn from their experiences. Since most of us had never been outside the United States, we were fascinated by their descriptions of the places from where they had flown their patrols. They told of life in such faraway places as Puerto Rico, Panama, Guatemala, and last, but not least, the "Rock."

The "Rock" was an island in the Galapagos Group, islands so remote and inaccessible that few Americans had ever heard of them. Mention the Galapagos to an American in 1943, and he was likely to reply, "It doesn't make any difference how strong those Japs are dug in there, our Marines will blast them the hell out of there any day now!" The Galapagos Islands were at least 4,000 miles from the nearest Japanese outpost. According to one disgruntled ex-resident of the Rock, the Japanese Navy probably had no idea that the islands even existed.

Listening carefully to the veterans and observing them closely, we were able to do more sorting. The defenders of the Panama Canal could be placed in one of two subgroups: (1) those who had spent an inordinate amount of time on the Rock, and (2) those who had spent an inordinate amount of time in Guatemala. We noted that whenever stories were begun, a subtle shifting and rearrangement of people took place so that the two subgroups came to occupy opposite sides of the room.

The Guatemala subgroup would go all dreamy eyed recalling mess hall tables laden with fresh tropical fruits, bars stocked with the finest liquors, balmy nights, friendly and courteous people, services of all kinds. Across the room sitting for the most part in stony-eyed silence, members of the Rock subgroup would mutter now and then about heat, dust, volcanic ash, and lizards. They gave out dark hints about orders and assignments being mysteriously shuffled, resulting in some sojourning on the Rock longer than they cared to remember. In time we newcomers to the 40th came to know all the Rock stories. Some of us came to know them quite well.

Most of us who were to go to India with the 40th were at Pratt by Christmas of 1943. A few newcomers trickled in during the later winter months. We felt an obligation to make them welcome and acquaint them with the history of the 40th Bomb Group. The newcomers were, as we had been months earlier, wide-eyed and vulnerable. We casually drew them out as to their backgrounds. Where had they trained? How had life been on and off those bases? We were delighted when we turned up a newcomer who had trained at a base such as Deming, Ft. Stockton, Odessa, or some other garden spot of the High Plains of New Mexico and west Texas. It took very little drawing out to get the newcomer to describe the hardships of life at such bases--shifting sands, eternal wind, dust, locusts, warm beer, the departure of all the young women for jobs in West Coast defense plants.

As already pointed out, some of us had become familiar with the stories of the Rock and could repeat them word for word just as we had heard them. The master teller of Rock tales was Shelly Green (deceased), although the closest Shelly had ever come to the Rock was a training flight to Brownsville, Texas.

We always arranged to have Shelly on hand when we were pumping a newcomer. When the latter had finished his story of travail and hardship, he would, of course, search our faces for signs of sympathy or amazement that anyone had survived duty at Ft. Stockton or wherever.

But we would only smile indulgently and turn to Shelly. And Shelly, on cue, would lean forward, push his hat back, and with the look of someone recalling bleak and desperate times, would begin, "Now when I was on the Rock."

Editor's Note: Here are the stories of the two missions flown from Tinian, one by a veteran crew, the other by a newly arrived crew. They tend to show that fate and the Japs did not consider duty on the "Rock" or newly arrived on Tinian to make a great deal of difference.

Date of event: Approx. April 14, 1945

Date written: Approx. 1993

Written by: George Lowry

Our crew was one of those sent to Tinian a month or so ahead of the 40th. We were assigned to fly missions with the 504th Group of the 313th Wing. The last flight I made with that Group was about the second or third day after the 40th got to Tinian. As was usual, we got assigned to fly far out on the left end of the left wing of the formation. That was the hardest place to fly because speeding up and slowing down up near the front of the formation gets exaggerated greatly by the time it gets back to the last wing man.

Just a bit after bombs were dropped, the Jap fighters started to hit us. I was flying from the copilot's seat, of course, when we got a report of fighters far above and ahead of us. Suddenly, I had all of my controls shot out. No anything. I yelled at the copilot to take over. He put his hands on the wheel and immediately dropped them and sort of shrugged. That meant that I had a plane on my hands with no controls. I did the first thing I could think of. I twisted the throttles a little and skidded the plane off to the left. In doing so I lost sight of the formation. I called the gunners to tell me where the formation was. They didn't realize what had gone on up front so they were pretty lackadaisical about specifics. We ended up somewhat out front of the formation and to the left. I had vision of the fighters ganging up on us but not one came our way. They went straight into the formation. (Many weeks later, I thought I had figured it out. We had very different tail markings from all the other planes in the formation, and the Japanese probably thought that this difference meant we were equipped with some formidable special weapons that would be disastrous to them if they attacked us so they wouldn't have any part of it.)

We headed on toward home without any escort. Shortly after learning we were clear of the formation, I reached across the aisle to the pilot's seat and turned on the autopilot. It was all set up just right for our load so that's what we flew with while weighing the benefits vs. the problems of trying to land on autopilot. Or should we just bail out when we got to Tinian?

After an hour or so of flight toward home, we had descended to a level where we didn't need oxygen. The flight engineer went back to see if he could find the trouble with the controls and fix it. After only 25 minutes he came back saying that a bullet had come through the upper side of the forward bomb bay in just the right trajectory to cut every control cable on the right side of the plane. He had some soft copper safety wire and tied the cables together. It would be sloppy, but maybe the controls could work.

A while later (close to two hours after we had been hit), the copilot began to shift his weight a bit. I noticed that the pilot's wheel was being jerked slightly from time to time, but nothing like that came through to the copilot's controls. The copilot and I traded seats. Then I found that the pilot's controls were undamaged and were working all the time.

When we got home and parked in the 421st Squadron area, I started back to see the damage in the bomb bay. I stopped short before I got there. The radio operator had never seen a fighter in action, so he put an extension on his headset and moved over to sit in the tunnel and watch through the navigator's bubble. Just as he got there, he looked through the door into the bomb bay and saw the

control cables being shot off. He turned around and discovered what had happened to his work station. There, another bullet had come down through his radio table and on down into our lower forward turret. That blew up our own ammunition which shot pieces back through the side of the turret and the top cover, continuing up through the radio operator's light metal chair and making a sieve of it before going through his table and completely shredding that. Tom Frederick, our radio operator, found that the bullets had come in no more than ten inches from his feet. Not one person was injured.

We left old #541 (Bombin' Buggy II) at North Field and picked up our orders to move at once to West Field. We did just that. I never saw #541 again. Red Carmichael was crew chief. He had gone over to West Field and never got back to North Field. #541 was repaired and flown back to West Field. To this day, Red says "it didn't happen," but I have verified the whole mess by phone with Tom Frederick.

In the meantime a new plane had come in and was to be assigned to the 44th. As fast as I could, I got over to Operations and found Neil Wemple there alone. By talking fast, I got him to assign the new plane to our crew. Next I got him to agree to having Red Carmichael and his crew transferred to the new plane. I got Red and his crew to move immediately and start work on the new plane. The very next morning, orders were issued by Wemple saying that in the future, ground crews would not be transferred to any new plane as it came in. That was one time I won.

Editor's Note: Following are a collection of thoughts about the experience of a "late arrival" crew. Late arrival, in the case of Dick Veach, doesn't necessarily mean rookie performance. His tour of duty in the 40th offers some interesting contrasts. Whereas it took the 40th six months to complete its first sixteen missions and seven months to complete the second sixteen, it took Dick Veach less than eight weeks to complete his first sixteen missions.

Date of event: May-July, 1945

Date written: 10 April, 1995

Written by: Dick Veach

I was assigned as a Pilot for Aircraft Commander Maj. John Schindler's crew. We completed B-29 training at Pyote, Texas, and were assigned to the 40th while picking up our new plane (#44-70094) at Topeka, Kansas. We flew it to Mather Field as our POE. All the crew but me loaded liquor. They disposed of the liquor cartons so that they could easily hide the individual bottles throughout the ship (under the insulation or in the ammunition boxes). I recall the bidding by the ground crew (\$35.00 a bottle) as they backed up a 6x6 for us to unload our gear. Our new plane was taken away from us.

I was assigned to a tent on a hillside. The first morning I could not find my shoes. A heavy rain during the night had washed them down the hillside about 20 feet.

On the third night on Tinian, while playing cards in the tent, our tail gunner came running up to the tent to tell me that I was scheduled out on the *next* mission which was to Hammamatsu. I was to fly Pilot for Capt. Dale. I remember slapping a 50-cent piece on the table to tell our tail gunner I was calling his bluff. After all, I wasn't even completely unpacked! After checking the bulletin board, I paid up. When I returned from the mission, the guys wanted to know what Japan looked like. I had to confess that I had not seen it, except for the top of Mt. Fuji sticking up out of the clouds.

Five days later, I went with Lt. Ream on a low-level incendiary (9,500 ft.) mission to Tokyo. After practice bombing for the past year at 20-25,000 feet, I thought we were low enough that they could throw rocks at us. I was impressed by my first sight of the burning city. It appeared that dozens of square miles were aflame. I noted that the Imperial Palace grounds were relatively flame free since we had been instructed to avoid dumping there.

Two nights later, I was back with Lt. Ream over Tokyo again to finish any business to be done to complete the burning of the city. We did not have to navigate the last few hundred miles; we just headed for the flames left by the first planes in our 500-plane raid. I remember mentally calculating that if each plane carried 19,500 pounds of 2½-pound thermite bombs (in 500-pound clusters), that a total of 3,900,000 thermite bombs would be dropped over a period of just a few hours. No wonder the Tokyo firemen never had a chance.

With our crew on the Yokohama raid, May 29, both the Tail Gunner and I did get a little excited. It was my job to tell the Waist Gunners, when we were caught by a searchlight, to throw out the "chaff" as the radar-attracting tin foil was known. On this raid, we were caught by a searchlight so I quickly interphoned back to the Gunners. "Throw out the searchlight, the chaff has got us!" The crew never let me forget that. It was also my job to personally interphone crew members whom I could not see, after we cleared the target area to verify that they were safe and not injured. I checked with all the crew members and got OK responses from all except our Tail Gunner. He would not respond to the intercom or to a light signal system we had established. Fearing the worst, I asked one of the Gunners to go check. (We were not pressurized right then.) He reported back in a few minutes that the tail gunner was OK, but he had been so scared that he could not respond to either the intercom or the light signal. Since it was the first mission for the rest of the crew, some of us agreed that we might have been just as scared back there all alone.

On one of our later incendiary trips, a night flight, we unknowingly flew into a tremendous updraft from the burning city below. I thought the wings would certainly break off as we were hurled hundreds of feet straight up, just as we were dropping our bombs. Even though strapped into his position, our CFC Gunner, Harlan Berndt, had his four upper front teeth broken off at the gum line when he was hurled into the framework of the plane. A routine check of the bomb bay a little later, showed all the racks were empty and that there was no apparent damage. We all thanked our Maker that the plane was still in one piece. As we neared Tinian for our landing, another check of the bomb bay revealed that a 500-pound thermite bomb had become wedged between the tunnel at the top of the bomb bay and the outside skin of the plane. Obviously, we had released the bombs just as we hit the incredible updraft. After an extra careful landing, we wasted no time getting out of the plane and letting the ground crew figure how to get the damned thing out.

We lost an engine due to lack of oil pressure on another mission. It happened just before we reached Japan. A quick conference on the interphone resulted in a unanimous decision by the crew to go ahead and bomb on three engines and not spoil our perfect record of no aborts, no missed missions, and always hitting the primary target. Several different planes flew alongside after noticing the feathered prop and kindly offered to escort us back to Iwo. However, they all gave up on us after finding out how slow we wanted to fly to conserve gas. We *slowly* flew to Iwo only to find there had been a crash on the runway which had not been cleared. Several more damaged planes were already there ahead of us waiting a chance to land. Conventional wisdom concerning gas consumption at that time was it took more total gas to fly a given distance on three engines than it did on four. Therefore, Iwo tower reasoned we could not possibly make it back to Tinian. Our excellent engineer, T/Sgt. Homer Ashby, having the benefit of later training regarding fuel consumption as it related to power and cowl settings, engine temperatures, etc., stated that we had plenty of gas to get back to Tinian. However, in order to achieve this maximum cruise that we had been taught was possible, it also required that Maj. Schindler and I keep the plane's nose up or "on the step" all the time. Even though Iwo tower didn't believe we could make it, we continued on south at a very slow rate of speed--about 160-170 mph--as I recall.

Tinian tower, too, had trouble with our story that we could make it. Several times on the rest of the trip, we had messages from Tinian, "Are you still up?" When we finally landed long after everybody else was in, we found it a great source of both pride and amusement when they dipped our tanks and found that we had *more* gas left than anybody else in the squadron.

Soon after the revelation of what a good crew with the latest training could do (and with good engines maintained by a good ground crew), we were notified that our crew had been selected for Lead Crew Training back at Muroc (now Edwards AFB). Some of the other crews that had been gone since they were first sent to India two years prior, naturally weren't too happy about our selection.

We were back at Muroc when the war ended. Nevertheless, we were required to complete our Lead Crew Training and this despite the fact that we were almost finished. Our orders then took us to Hamilton Field at SF where we were to be flown back to Tinian via ATC. However, ATC had received their own orders from Washington. They *could not* fly anybody back overseas who had already been over. A flurry of telegrams both to Tinian and Washington resulted in a welcome decision to "Send them home for discharge."

One final memory: On what was to have been my last day in the service at Ft. Leavenworth, I had to report in as "sick" at the base hospital. When I told them I had appendicitis, they immediately wanted to know where I had gone to medical school. After a few minutes of flaring tempers, they got some blood tests back that showed my appendix was about to burst. While they were racing around getting ready to operate, I headed for the showers. If the Doc was still fuming and was going to kill me on the operating table, at least I would be a clean corpse. The shower ended when the nurse came in and ordered me back to bed to get ready for a rush operation. I missed a few weeks of classes because of the operation before I was enrolled again at the U. of N. for the fall.

I liked the ratio I had of 28 months in training versus two months of combat. I also liked the record of 30 months from buck private to pilot of a B-29, then our country's biggest bomber.



40th Bomb Group Association
2510 Tulane Ave., Alamogordo, NM 88310

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