



## Rod Wriston's Crew Flies the Tokyo Mission of May 25-26

**Date of event:** 25-26 May, 1945

**Date written:** April-August, 1996 (Plus earlier undated material)

**Written by:** James J. O'Keefe, Earl Rishell, Reuben G. Bass, John C. Blackard, George G. Johnson

Crew members on this mission:

1/Lt. Roderic T. Wriston—A/C (Deceased)	Homer D. Blackburn—CFC
1/Lt. Verble Mitchell—CP (Deceased)	Sgt. James E. Garner—LG (Deceased)
1/Lt. Ralph Weinberg—N	S/Sgt. Reuben G. Bass—RG
1/Lt. James J. O'Keefe—B	T/Sgt. John C. Blackard—TG
F/O Earl F. Rishell—FE	Sgt. George G. Johnson—Radar (Deceased)
S/Sgt. William A. Treanor—R (Deceased)	

**Note:** Due to discrepancies in records, there is uncertainty about the crew list. It is believed that this list is accurate for this mission. Records do not show Homer Blackburn's rank at the time of the mission.

**Editor's Note:** Some facts about the overall mission are taken from Ivan Potts' autobiography *Remembrance of War*. Ivan flew this mission as co-pilot of Myrel Massey's crew. Ivan records that of all 20th Air Force missions, this was the most costly. The 40th had 33 planes take off for the mission. In all, the 20th Air Force lost 26 planes with 254 men killed. This represented 6% of the striking force. The target for the mission was the area of Tokyo near the Imperial Palace and just north of the area struck on the raid two nights earlier. The target area included Tokyo's financial, commercial and government districts in addition to factories and homes. Together with earlier missions, 86% of the target area was destroyed. On orders, the Imperial Palace was not to be targeted and it was not hit.

The experience of Rod Wriston's crew in #740 *Harry Miller* was one of the more harrowing of any of the crews that took part in the mission. Five members of the crew—Jim O'Keefe, John Blackard, Reuben Bass, Jim Garner and George Johnson were awarded DFCs. Earl Rishell gives us one of the best accounts ever written of a combat mission as experienced by a Flight Engineer.

**Jim O'Keefe tells what happened.** This was a night mission flown at an altitude of 10,000 feet over the target. The moment we hit the IP we were picked up by a searchlight and subjected to intense flak. We were passed from searchlight to searchlight, and we suffered at least 10 direct hits. One engine was shot out. Rod Wriston and Earl Rishell feathered it. Several minutes from the aiming point, the radio operator reported that the incendiaries in our forward bomb bay were on fire. Then, one of the gunners reported incendiaries in the rear bomb bay were ablaze.

In good conscience, I, as bombardier, could have immediately salvoed all bombs and told Rod to get the hell out of there. I didn't (thus becoming a junior-grade hero). I held those bombs to the aiming point (which resulted in our taking more flak) and put them in the target area. Rod could have ordered me to salvo the burning bombs, but he said nothing. As A/C his orders would have prevailed. So we took the searchlights and flak for several more long tense minutes. (I was sure we were finished.)

To add to the harrowing nature of the mission, we flew that heavily damaged plane all the way back to Tinian (1,500 miles) rather than divert to Iwo. The plane was so badly shot up it never flew again. When we landed and turned it over to Benny Slonina, our crew chief, he almost fainted when he found the main spar was on the point of snapping. If Rod had had a rough touch on the controls, the damn plane could have snapped and fallen apart in mid-air.

**Editor's Note:** Dealing with the mechanics and technology of a B-29 on a combat mission has seldom--if ever--been told. Here is Flight Engineer Earl Rishell's account of this raid on Tokyo.

**Earl Rishell records the mission as he experienced it:** What with critiques, briefings and the constant readying and checking of the aircraft between missions, flight engineers were the most sleep-deprived of all combat crew members. An afternoon takeoff for a 15- to 16-hour, overnight mission like the one of May 25-26, after a long day of aircraft preparation did nothing to improve the situation. Some of us had not fully recovered from a 15-hour mission only two days before. But more than sleep, we wanted to end the war. Many of us felt annihilating the stubborn Japanese was the only way to do it.

When the crew climbed up the ladder into the front compartment of a B-29 an hour and a half, or more before takeoff time, they knew it was an ascent into a world of awesome technological achievement. It was a world from which they would not descend except by misadventure--for the next 14 hours, or longer.

Nearly as daunting to the engineer as the over-water flight to Japan itself was the taxi out to the active runway on a maximum effort mission. Getting 300 aircraft into the air at three-minute intervals meant a long, creeping promenade of aircraft stretching back over a network of taxiways to miles-distant parking revetments. With normal as well as unexpected snafus, the process took more than one day and the first planes out returned before the last planes took off.

Grossed out at 30 tons, the taxi trip from a distant revetment to the active runway seemed an endless series of high revving starts, lunging, wallowing turns and sudden, full-braking stops. Interspersed with this stop-and-go, rush-hour-like traffic were periods of tedious standing at taxiway intersections as we waited to take our place in the interminable parade. Loaded with fuel, bombs, 50 caliber ammo and a crew, the engines, brakes and tires, were brought close to--or exceeded design limits again and again--and we were still on the ground. With engines idling in the 90-plus OAT, and a rotisserie-like environment in the cabin, we sat drenched in sweat. The cylinder head temperatures--always high on the grounds defiantly edged into the red. Memories of swallowed valves, engine failures and aborted takeoffs back in India, all too easily came to mind. Now, only halfway to the active runway, the fuel gauge needles had begun their relentless, downward circle and would not stop until the night had come and gone, we had been to Japan and back and were once more on the ground.

Once the end of the active runway was reached, the Tinian takeoff was a five-minute exercise in white-knuckle concentration and silent prayer by everyone on board. When the pilot applied full throttle, the heavy plane seemed stuck in mire and unwilling to roll. But horsepower won out over weight, and the plane finally began to move. The air speed indicator needle stopped bouncing and began to move slowly upward. At 30 knots or so, Mitchell began calling out the airspeed at 5-knot intervals. The rate of acceleration seemed so slow I was certain we would roll off the runway and down the embankment long before we reached sixty knots. But the engines did their job. RPM and manifold pressure were there and stayed put. Cylinder head temperatures in yellow or red for the best part of an hour now crept back toward the green.

Increasingly accepting their responsibility, the wings began to relieve the tires of their burden. Wriston artfully rotated, and we were over the water. Mitchell brought up the gear and gradually retracted the flaps as speed increased. During the full power, five-minute takeoff and initial climb, the engines burned two barrels of fuel. In just five minutes, each of the four engines drank in 20 gallons of blue, high octane fuel. The furious consumption was gradually throttled off to match the best climb configuration for the loaded plane. We were safely in the air, and as far as I was concerned at the time, the most harrowing part of the flight was over. A throttle jockey's mistake here in choice of climb rate, or power setting to reach cruising altitude while heavily loaded could mean empty tanks before we got back home. Thankfully, Rod Wriston was cool, respectfully deferring to the readouts on my slip stick.

Once we had reached an assigned altitude and could maintain it at less than 1800 RPM in the early hours of the flight without falling back, fuel consumption could be cut to close to 250 gallons per hour--and a little later as the plane lightened--somewhat less. For every hundred gallons of fuel burned our compensation was 600 pounds less weight. Aside from fuel consumption, my chief concerns now were aircraft trim, head wind, oil and fuel pressure, OAT and the navigator's checkpoint ETA's being met, or bettered.

Visibility after nightfall with no running lights was the concern of the two in the front office--Wriston and Mitchell--plus the bombardier, and the crew in the back. Star shine, moonlight and blue-orange exhaust, would sometimes reveal another plane on a parallel course in the darkness, but if the exhaust was visible, we were too close for buddy-buddy flying and cautious separation was called for. There were others doing what we were doing both above us and below, and on either side. Some coming and some going. Quickly altering course in the dark was not wise.

By the time we entered the traffic pattern at the IP we had already used half the fuel we left home with. But now we had the advantage of a lighter plane soon to become lighter still when the bombs were dropped. Besides, we had no costly takeoffs to make on the homeward journey--we were already in the air and if the weather didn't require expensive climbing, we could land on Tinian with several hundred gallons of gas to spare.

Like the tail gunner sitting in inaccessible isolation way back at the rear end of the airplane, I rode into battle facing backwards. My first glimpse of the glow in the sky from the bombed and burning city was by a reflection in the glass on the instruments before me and the little I could glimpse out my side window. When I turned to look forward over my right shoulder, the entire visible horizon ahead was aflame from earth to sky. The burning city illuminated the covering clouds of its own smoke, making the sky appear afire and hot as the inferno on the ground.

All at once a roving searchlight lit up the inside of the cabin. It quickly left us, then a half dozen others picked us up and hung on. Shells exploded in orange-red flashes around us, jolting and rocking the plane. We could hear the shells crack and thump. Then it seemed like at least a dozen searchlights had found us. The cabin was brighter than day. Shell fragments striking the plane sounded like gravel being forcefully thrown on a tin roof. Upwelling heat from the fires below created a storm of turbulence, and the plane was making strange, creaking, cracking and rending sounds of its own. Surely rivets were being popped with the stress. I thought the rain of shell fragments was turning the plane's skin into a sieve. The smell from the fires below seeped into our face masks. It was the same odor I had smelled as a kid when I climbed over the blackened remains of my best friend's home that had burned the day before. Then, burnt, painted wood, bedding, rugs and roofing all combined with water from the firemen's hoses to create the same kind of stench now pouring upward from the holocaust two miles below. For the first time on any raid I had flown, I came to realize we were actually doing personal, hurtful damage to real people on the ground below, and I knew if we were forced to bail out within fifty miles of this awful place, we would not survive their anger and hatred.

While constantly watching RPM and the fuel and oil pressures I frequently turned to see if we still had a pilot and co-pilot--and to assure myself the nose of the airplane was still intact. Although I couldn't see their faces, Wriston and Mitchell seemed calm and unperturbed. There was none of the near-hysterical yelling into the intercom I had heard with other crews in far less-challenging circumstances. As best they could, the pilot and co-pilot kept the plane on course in the thrashing turbulence. The plane staggered discernibly when the bomb bay doors came open. A few minutes later we lurched upward as someone yelled, "bombs away."

As Wriston made a descending, power-on turn to depart the target area, we were still coned by the searchlights and being shot at. The plunking and thumping sounds continued, but at a lesser rate. Almost immediately, a crewman in the rear, yelled into the intercom, "Number three is on fire!" From my seat I could not see any fire. But I gave number 3 a shot of CO<sub>2</sub>. A moment later I heard, "It's still burning, Sir, I see the smoke."

We decided to shut the engine down and close off the fuel line. As the propeller came to rest at full feather, I gave it more CO<sub>2</sub> then took the portable signal light and, rising from my seat, looked back toward the trailing edge of the wing behind #3 engine. A white plume of escaping fuel some three to four inches in diameter and several feet long was streaming aft. In the reflected firelight now fading behind us, the white vapor looked like smoke to the gunner.

I was glad it was fuel and not smoke. I decided to pump what fuel remained in the ruptured tank into number 2. I figured if we could keep three engines running and the wing didn't dissolve in fire, we could make it far enough to ditch and be picked up by a U.S. submarine.

Then I was interrupted by the radio operator who reported seeing sparks, or fire inside the bomb bay through the little window in the hatch. I quickly moved to the hatch with a portable fire extinguisher, but I could see no fire or sparks. I crawled in to check for damage that might possibly cause trouble. There were some holes in the bomb bay doors---one or two big enough to stick your arm through and many small ones. I found some sheared electrical wiring in the bomb racks, but no fire or sparks. I quickly returned to my seat and asked the radio man to keep his eye on the bomb bay as I began pumping fuel out of number 3 into number 2. I prayed none of the fuel lines or pump circles had been cut.

The burning target area had now nearly faded from sight, and we were headed out over the sea. Soon, the side gunner could no longer see leaking fuel. Number 3 gauge showed about 350 gallons remaining. I continued transferring until only about 200 gallons remained in the ruptured tank. With no good excuse to wait any longer, I cranked the engine. Without diving, our airspeed was not up to starting the engine quickly by windmilling in the slipstream. Altitude was an asset we were anxious to keep. My plan was to nurse the engine along on a near-empty tank by frequently transferring from the other tanks. After starting the engine we quickly put it to work with the others. We were low on fuel. But with the lack of accuracy in the fuel gauges, I didn't know exactly how much, but I was sure it had to be about 200 gallons, the amount allowed for reserve.

In the early morning light as we breakfasted on soggy, turkey salad sandwiches, crew members in the rear were able to spot damage to the skin and ailerons. Oil streaked the bottom of the wing behind number 4. Some small shell fragments had entered the rear cabin, and even adhered to the crewmen's clothing, but no one was hit, or even scratched. As I recall, John Blackard then came forward and gave me a break on the way home. He and "old" Reuben Bass (he was 39) were two of the most steadfast, least excitable crewmen under stress I ever flew with. The engines ran well all the way home while I transferred fuel repeatedly as needed. We were able to return to Tinian, without further incident. According to my records, flying time on this flight was 14 hours and 41 minutes (11 hours of nighttime flying).

On inspecting the plane after the flight, I found there was little left in the tanks but fumes. When the self-sealing tanks were found to have a number of perforations, only one four-inch hole remained open. The fuselage had numerous holes. None so big they could not be patched, but so numerous, patching all of them was impractical.

My log for the flight was turned in, but I scribbled some computations and simple notes in my flight folder. This was the fifth of eighteen flights over the Japanese Islands in which I participated. The last one was August 1, 1945 before being rotated to Uncle Sugar.

**John Blackard gives his account of the mission:** We were put on alert a couple of hours before we got to Japan. When we got over land, the searchlights picked us up. It was so bright, all I could see was a blanket of flak but no fireball or Jap fighters. The turbulence in the tail gunner's position was very strong.

We were hit several times in the bomb bay section. Sgt. William Treanor could see a fire in the bomb bay. He reported to Captain Wriston but the Captain and Jim O'Keefe had the plane on automatic pilot and the bombs were dropped on target. The fire in the bomb bay went out. Before we left The Empire, one of our engines was hit and had to be feathered.

We stayed on alert for a couple hours after we left the target. We felt helpless, just passengers. We didn't talk about what we had just gone through. We knew the plane was flying with three engines and was hit in several other places, but we had been told that the B-29 could fly with three engines and even with two for a short time. We had to put our faith in Captain Wriston's skills in flying. He did a magnificent job along with the navigator who kept us on course. I don't remember any of the crew talking about being afraid. We all had faith that we would return.

After we landed at Tinian and got out of the plane, we were able to see the massive destruction to the plane. We were so close to being wiped out and yet, no one was hurt. The plane was damaged so bad that it was declared salvage.

**Reuben Bass tells what he remembers:** On the night of May 24, our crew flew to Tokyo. We made a hit and returned safely to Tinian. And on May 26, we flew to Tokyo again. On the way into the target we took seven hits in the belly of the plane. The bombs in the bomb bay caught fire. The radio operator saw the bombs afire and called Jim O'Keefe to tell him. The bombs were dumped on Tokyo and then the searchlights were turned on us. I had never seen anything so bright. I really never smelled anything. In spite of everything, I had no concerns about making it back to Tinian. I felt what was to be would be. This was the plane's last mission.

**Editor's Note:** An event so life threatening as this Tokyo mission causes the Irish sense of humor to surface. In another, more extended account of this mission, found in Jim O'Keefe's book, *Days of the 40th*, Jim has written "Struggling to put the horrors of the mission out of my mind I turned to humor, the counterpoise that preserves sanity."

**Jim O'Keefe employs humor to recount one event that occurred on the mission:** Rod Wriston, as cool and able a pilot as ever I flew with, banked the battered plane slowly and carefully away from the burning city, the searchlights, and anti-aircraft guns. We caught our collective breaths only to gasp in sudden shock and alarm at the bright light which appeared above and in front of us. A mother plane's searchlights probing for us? And then below us a stream of tracers shot into the darkness, a B-29 gunner firing at what unknown menace?

I swung my gunsight to cover the light and brought four fifty-calibre machine guns to bear on it. We staggered on, the light neither gaining on us nor fading away. We banked again, and this brought us onto a south heading, the way to Tinian. The great bright light was now to the east of us, and it stayed there and was visible until the sun came up. It had been out there in space a few million years, sometimes appearing in the evening sky, sometimes in the morning sky. To us earthlings, studying the skies, Venus is far and away the brightest and most brilliant of our neighbor planets. At interrogation we had many things to report. Our own experiences, shaking though they had been, were as nothing compared to the fates of other crews. Stricken, burning B-29's had been seen to plunge to earth all along that fearful run to the city.

We left the interrogation room and sought out our cots. I had not reported the Great Searchlight in the Sky. But rumors had circulated over at interrogation. Several gunners and bombardiers on other crews had seen the light and fired on it without hesitation. The fifty-calibre slugs, directed by the marvelously precise electronic sight had sped unerringly toward the target. I got up and poked through my footlocker and found some notes from navigation school. The target was about 26 million miles away. Given the muzzle velocity, a little acceleration beyond the earth's atmosphere, and the distance to travel, and the slugs should land on Venus about twelve months later.

Who knows what forms of life might exist on mysterious, cloud-covered Venus? It is possible then that months later on that planet's surface a group of little green men would have gathered around a bullet-ridden Venusian condominium chattering excitedly, jumping up and down in anger. And it is possible that they would then have wheeled out of asbestos hangars (temperatures of 900°F on Venus) a fleet of vehicles, wiped and cleaned the pilot's Pyrex windows, plotted a course from Venus to Earth on their space charts and whirled away.

The time sequence is about right. Twelve months for the slugs to reach Venus, a few days to pre-flight the vehicles and hold a briefing, then off on the twelve-month journey to Earth. On June 24, 1947, high over the snow-covered ridges of the Cascade Mountains of Washington, nine bright, flashing disks swooped and soared along the route from Mt. Rainier to Mt. Adams. A C-46 transport lumbering along the same route was passed by the flying disks. "They flew like a saucer would if you skipped it across the water," said the awed pilot. On June 28 they whirled over Nevada, on July 4 over Boise, Idaho, on July 10 over New Mexico. You may scoff at this explanation of why the disks appeared in 1947, but I'm glad I held my fire that early morning in May, 1945. Those saucers aren't on my conscience.

**Editor's Note:** To express themselves about their war experiences, a very large number of men in WW II used poetry tell their thoughts. Perhaps they felt their inner feelings would be less revealed if poetry were used as the medium. Perhaps getting thoughts down in rhyme was easier than writing an essay. Whatever the reason, poetry was often used. Here is a poem about Wriston's crew written by George G. Johnson, radar man.

#### Captain Wriston's Crew

Gather 'round me gentlemen and a story I will tell  
That concerns eleven combat men that could fly a Superfort through hell  
The cool courageous gentleman that was captain of this team,  
Is a handsome mustachioed West Point lad the answer to a maiden's dream.

The Navigators, we had a few I don't recall them all, but I will say this:  
Every one was always on the ball  
Honorable mention for work done more than well, guess who?  
That's right, the Engineer, ole satchel-ass Rishell  
And now about that fellow that could stare at flack with ease,  
Go floating down the bomb run just as easy as you please

When this gent sang out "bombs away" we'd all sigh with great relief

Excellent results would sum it up for Lt. Jim O'Keefe.

In finishing with the boys up front, we can't forget this chap,

His duty was mostly listening, in an emergency he'd tap, he'd code, decode and shackle,  
He'd send, receive and send, continue on forever 'till his hair would stand on end,

But then our radio operator always was a good point gainer.

You know of course I'm speaking of S/Sgt. Willie (Boston) Treanor.

That takes care of the boys. up front, so here we take a trip,

On our bellies through the tunnel to the ass end of the ship

Here we meet the gunners, a hearty bunch—boys to whom the best in Jap aircraft,

Is just so much Tinker Toys.

The Left Gunner's name is Garner, he's from the motion picture town,

When this boy sights a Japanese that Nip is going down,

In flight if something does go wrong, he's sure to wear a frown,

He'll crawl around the Dreamboat until he tracks the trouble down.

And now the CFC man (supreme gun commander to you)

The guy that rides the highchair with his eyes up in the blue,

He tells the other gunners how much ammo to load,

And directs the pow'full 29's guns on any Jap that gets in the road.

Tommie comes from Pennsylvania, to where he'll soon return

To a gal that's cute in a one piece suit in the metropolis called Malvern

At the Right Gunner's position sits an easy going guy,

Just as cool as pilot Wriston no matter where we fly

He'll call in a Nip fighter like he's asking for a Coke,

I'll remember well that Bangkok skit and the coolness of this bloke

But he's right there when the shooting counts, a gunner that's first class,

Illinois gift to the Air Corps, S/Sgt. Reuben Bass

And now the unsung hero, who's job's yet unsurpassed,

He always finds the M.P.I. through the thickest undercast,

The navigator's buddy as he calls the checkpoints clear,

A pal as well to another guy O'Keefe the bombardier.

So gentlemen here we raise our glass while G.G. Johnson takes the bow,

We'll drink in cadence then drink it down, steady, read, now!

And now we crawl away on back to the ranking enlisted man,

Who's plumbing consists of nothing more than a battered gallon can

But J.C. (Baldy) Blackard more than done his part.

Was the only one of the eleven men to receive the Purple Heart

And so it ends, this little tale of eleven men tried and true

That did fly a Superfort through hell—Captain Wriston and his crew



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