



**Date of event:** May 24 and 26, 1945

**Written by:** Several contributors at various times

**EDITORS' INTRODUCTION:** Two of the largest air raids of World War II were the night fire-bombing missions against Tokyo in the early morning hours of May 24 and 26, 1945. Over 500 B-29's (including about 30 from the 40th Group) bombed Tokyo, dropping about 3,500 to 4,000 tons of incendiaries on each of the two missions, and starting a major fire storm that burned out 22 square miles of Tokyo. The B-29's faced intense opposition, including over 100 searchlights, heavy flak and automatic weapons fire, night fighters, and rocket-propelled Bakas. On those two nights, 43 B-29's were lost, and 169 were damaged. The 40th Group lost 3 planes, with some others damaged so severely that they never flew again. Here we print the memories of several participants from the 40th Bomb Group, including one (Dale Johnson) who bailed out over Tokyo on May 26 and was the sole survivor of Ronald Harte's crew in #269.

Memories of J. E. ("Dusty") Child, Pilot of #233, "Tabooma II" (written 1985)

The years have dimmed details, but the two raids were very similar overall. Flight out past Iwo Jima and in to the IP (Initial Point) was quite routine. On the 24 May mission we did have one troubling experience while we were still some distance south of the IP, which was west of Tokyo. A shape crossed our path from left to right or west to east. It was night and dark, of course, but there was enough light to see this definite shadow. In a few seconds, we hit several sharp, rather violent bumps--the telltale turbulence of an aircraft crossing our path, as opposed to the rolling motion of propwash from an aircraft ahead of us. I have no idea, really, how close we came. There was speculation that it might have been a fighter, but I was and am convinced that it was a B-29. Where it was going and where it came from, I don't know. But the air in our cockpit was blue with a few thousand well-chosen words.

From the IP in to the target, again, the missions were similar. Batteries of searchlights picked us up shortly after we started our run. Each battery of lights would "walk" us into the next battery as we proceeded on course. We could see other B-29's in the lights off to our right and left. And from time to time B-29's would be silhouetted against the background of fire. Based on ground flashes and occasional tracers the flak seemed to be light to moderate. I had reports of some fighters in the area but saw none myself.

By the time we reached the immediate target area fires were building up rapidly. There were patches of fire on the eastern outskirts of Tokyo and larger areas of fire in the center of the city. There was enough light to see certain key portions of the city. On the whole it was one horrendous area of fire.

The smoke billowed up thousands of feet. We had released our bombs shortly before we hit the smoke cloud. Naturally there was extreme turbulence and the thermals caused the aircraft to rise several thousands of feet. We were like a cork on the ocean, bouncing in every direction. We entered the cloud at the prescribed bombing altitude, which was 10 or 11,000 feet, as I recall. We came out of the smoke a few minutes later at 16 or 17,000 feet. At our speed that meant the smoke cloud was some 10-15 miles in diameter. The odor of smoke was very evident inside the aircraft.

We left the target and proceeded home to Tinian. After flashlight checks at night and further checks after daybreak we could see some flak damage. But all engines were turning. Ground checks confirmed minor damage on both missions. Strangely enough, we logged the same time, to the minute, on both missions--14 hours, 50 minutes.

The Tokyo raids were significant and memorable. However, as I was to learn later (in mid-June), the most significant event for me had to be my wife giving birth, in California, to my son, John, at about the same time I was over Tokyo on 26 May 1945.

Memories of Dale Johnson, 44th Bomb Squadron (written February 1985)

Right Gunner on Ronald Harte's crew

Everything was going fine till we got near Tokyo and made our turn toward the target. Our altitude was pretty low, we all thought. The searchlights started to pick us up. I think we could have read a newspaper in the gunners' compartment.

We had not dropped our bombs before we were hit. I think we were hit by anti-aircraft guns from the ground. There was no communication from any crew members after we were hit. The plane had a big hole near my position (Right Gunner), and I felt it was falling, so I rolled out the hole, waited a few seconds, and pulled the ripcord on my chute. That was the last I saw any members of my crew.

I landed on the edge of a bay or lake. Needless to say, I was scared to death. An anti-aircraft Gun Camp was about a half-mile from where I landed. I watched them shoot down two planes, plus it looked like they hit some. I never did see any night fighters from the ground where I was. I hid out the rest of the night, and the next morning I walked to the Gun-Camp MP booth and gave myself up. I thought that was better than the civilians catching me. I caused a lot of excitement. I should mention I had only a few cuts and bruises from the hit and bailing out. I believe the good Lord must have been watching over me.

The Japs took me to an office and took my watch, pens, jacket, rings, knife, and anything they thought they could use. They then took me in a truck to an interrogation center. I was always blindfolded, so I really didn't know for sure where I went. Some English speaking Jap asked me a lot of questions about family, where home was, where I was stationed, and if I was in a B-29. My answers were pretty vague, so he made me stand on my head with my feet on the wall, then beat my back and rear. After I collapsed on the floor, they finally quit asking questions and let me be.

Next they took me to where I spent most of my POW time--a building with about six rooms where they put 12 to 14 men in about a 10 by 12 foot space. Food was rice balls and water with a little fish once in awhile. I went from 150 lbs. down to 100 lbs. in the one hundred days I was there. Most of the other men in my room were from other island invasions; some were Navy men. Once they brought in two Navy pilots who were injured badly (plus a broken leg), and they got no medical attention. They got so sick they took them out, but I'm sure they died they were so bad. We would get some news through the knot holes from room to room when somebody new was brought in. We were not supposed to talk at all. It was hard for that many men in one room to get along with a shortage of food. Some would get greedy and want more than their share. The guards would take one or two men out each day to clean the toilet boxes, which was the only exercise we got. I got out twice in the time I was there.

After the U.S. dropped the A-Bomb and they declared the truce, we were moved to a regular POW Camp (Omori). Conditions were much better there. We even got to wash and take baths--which was the first time since I bailed out. After a few days the American planes were flying over dropping clothes and food. What a beautiful sight!

A Navy small boat came in and took us to a Hospital ship in Tokyo Bay area. That was a great day in my life. We got good food for a change, but we couldn't eat too much as we were not used to it. I got to send a telegram home through the Red Cross. This was the first I could let my parents know I was still alive.

Next, we were put on a LSV navy boat and sent to Guam, where we were put in the Base Hospital for a few days for a check up. Most of us just needed time to get our strength back and gain some weight. I guess they didn't have enough planes to airlift us back to the States, so they put us back on the same ship, and we headed to San Francisco with a stop at Honolulu. It took us about a week until I was in Letterman General Hospital in San Francisco. This was about the last week of September.

I had more check-ups and recuperation. They took us to Berkeley, California, to a college football game, over the Golden Gate Bridge, and on tours of the city. From there, I took the train back home to Rio, Illinois, and a thirty-day leave.

Memories of Fountain L. Brown, Pilot, 44th Bomb Squadron (written late in 1985)

I've flown through a few violent cumulonimbus (thunderstorm) clouds in my day, but none of them were as violent as the thermal smoke cloud we flew through on one of the Tokyo missions. Our assigned time to make our bomb drop was such that we arrived over the city long after many other B-29's had started a fire storm below. It was impossible to avoid the massive cloud of smoke-laden, turbulent updrafts. A B-29 always popped up a few feet at bomb release due to the sudden decrease in gross weight, and over Tokyo we not only had that sudden gain in altitude, but at the same time we flew into the cloud's violent updrafts which took control of the aircraft.

Our crew Copilot was O. Wade Burchett, a big, strong, young fella fresh off an Iowa cattle ranch. When the turbulence started, Wade joined me on the flight controls to try to keep the wings straight and level. We lost the battle. In less than the minute it took to fly completely through the smoke cloud, our aircraft was lifted more than 3000 feet and the aircraft heading was turned about 90 degrees. The additional altitude was appreciated because it helped Flight Engineer Leonard Morris use less fuel on the way home. However, the crew would have gladly given back the 3000 feet if it could have been spared the wild ride in the smoke cloud.

Memories of Robert L. Hall, 44th Bomb Squadron (written December 1985)

CFC Gunner on Fountain Brown's crew

I cannot separate the two Tokyo missions in my mind; they blur together. Over the preceding year we had flown many different kinds of missions: daylight formation, solo high-altitude precision, radar bombing through overcast, night low-altitude fire bombing, some with heavy anti-aircraft fire, some with aggressive fighters, some with little opposition. But these two Tokyo missions were unique.

They started out like earlier night fire-bombing missions, except that we were warned that the opposition might be intense. What we found on arriving at the target was awe-inspiring--a baffling, surrealistic fireworks display. There were searchlights wandering around the sky, occasionally catching a B-29 and forming a bright cone of lights that made the plane a luminous target. There were fires already burning on the ground--large fires pouring up a huge smoke cloud over the city. There were tracer bullets from the automatic cannons forming graceful parabolic arcs in the sky around us. There were explosions of heavy-caliber anti-aircraft fire, some with streamers of hot-burning phosphorous. There were fast moving balls of fire that looked like rockets. There were slow-moving balls of fire--perhaps burning airplanes.

There were unexplained explosions. There was billowing black smoke, silhouetted against a red glowing sky, with an occasional searchlight dancing on the surface of the smoke cloud. The whole effect was eerie and unreal: so many puzzling things were flying in all directions that I sat awe-struck, a little disoriented. I felt helpless because, though my finger was ready on the trigger, I had nothing to shoot at. I had to sit still, clamp my teeth together, and take it.

There were moments of harsh reality in this surrealistic world: a plane going down in flames, the blinding light of searchlights when they caught our plane and held us helplessly lighted for a seeming eternity, the terrifying turbulence of the thermal smoke cloud when we flew into it, still carrying a full load of those treacherous "matchstick" bombs. Inside the smoke cloud we could see nothing, but we could smell the powerful odor of the burning city and feel the violent gyrations. When the bombardier finally called, "Bombs away," our 50 or 60 tons of airplane was being tossed around like a leaf, and I wondered if those firebombs would make it out of the bombbay without hitting our plane.

At last we emerged from the thermal cloud, a few thousand feet higher than we entered it, into a strangely peaceful quiet of the night sky, flying smoothly, with the surrealistic inferno safely behind us. Forty minutes later, over a hundred miles off the Japanese coast, we could still see the red glow of Tokyo burning. I had never heard our crew so quiet on the way back to home base.

I have one other sharp memory--the hollow, sinking feeling I had at the briefing for the second mission. Back just over a day from the harrowing experience of May 24, we were called to a briefing and told that we were to repeat the whole exercise. I could think of no experience I was more reluctant to repeat, but repeat it we did--such a faithful repetition that I cannot separate the two in my mind. By the way, it took 25 years after the war before I could stand to watch a fireworks display.

Memories of Hibbard A. Smith, Bombardier, 45th Bomb Squadron (written May 1985)

I flew both missions in #555 with Maj. Glen Landreth as pilot. The Tokyo missions were the 4th and 5th I flew in May, and my recollection is hazy. Because there was a shortage of Bombardiers (Plexiglas is lousy armorplate), I flew several times with Maj. Landreth as check pilot with new crews. However, on both Tokyo missions I believe it was his regular crew, but am not sure. Both missions were similar in plan. A series of four or five aiming points on a north/south line. Approach was from the southwest, with breakaway over the bay. As I recall, the aiming points were shifted to south on the second mission to take in undamaged areas.

The sight of Tokyo in the midst of a fire raid was awesome. As a Bombardier I had a view like no one else's. If I had the talent to put on canvas what I can still see in my mind's eye, and do it with extreme detail, unless you were told what it was, it would appear to be the purest of abstractions. There was fire on the ground, fire in the sky, and no line of separation. The defenses included some sort of pale green pyrotechnics on the ground to light up the sky, but they also lit up the target.

The 40th must have been one of the last groups over the target both nights. The area was heavily involved in flames as we came in. I could see B-29's ahead and lower silhouetted against the city. I could only hope there were no stragglers under us or over us. On May 24th there were B-29's to the north and south of us caught in searchlights, and we slipped thru undetected. Aiming was visual, and I picked out an area not yet burning heavily. Later study of detail target charts lead me to believe we had unloaded in the general vicinity of the American Embassy.

The May 26 mission was almost a replay of May 24. Again B-29's to left and right caught in searchlights, and we tried to sneak thru again. This time they weren't fooled. A light pulled off the cones of light north and south and locked onto us. Being in searchlights is a most helpless feeling. You can not see beyond the surface of your window. I assume the pilots went to instruments. Maj. Landreth took violent evasive action, and shook off the lights. I do not recall if radar released or I salvoed to get rid of the weight, but the bombs did go out the doors they were supposed to and we broke away out over the bay. Tail gunner reported a suspected Baka Bomb behind us, but a relatively gentle turn to the right settled that problem, and we were on our way back to Tinian.

Memories of Carter McGregor, Pilot, 45th Bomb Squadron. Excerpts reprinted with permission from his book, *The Kasu-Tsuchi Bomb Group*, published 1981.

At the briefing, the roll was called and all were present. The Group Commander told us, "This is a special occasion for the benefit of the Japanese. Tonight every B-29 in the Pacific that is ready to fly will take a load of fire bombs to Tokyo and we are going to burn the place to the ground... You will go in lower than we have ever done before--your bombing altitude will be between ten and eleven thousand feet." When he said that, there was an audible gasp from the assembled flight crews. Ten thousand feet over Tokyo--they could throw rocks at us at that altitude--somebody had to be crazy to send us in that low! [Editor's note: We skip until near the target.]

As we droned on closer, we could see the city was an inferno. Mixed with the reflection from the fire was the bursting of anti-aircraft shells and the glare of countless crossing searchlight beams, trying to pin one of our bombers in a relentless ray. This was truly a scene from hell, horrible in its reality, beyond the wildest imagination, vividly etched in the minds of those who were witness to this holocaust. Tokyo engulfed in a sea of flames was truly a modern Armageddon! .... One of the searchlights caught us in the beam and we were momentarily blinded. At 10,400 feet, two miles above the city, the interior of the flight deck was brighter than day, as though a giant light globe had just been turned on. I could not take evasive action to try to get out of the beam, for that would have upset the bombardier's sighting, and a turn at the time of release would have thrown them to the side, just as a boat would sling water in a skid. Other searchlights saw our silhouette outlined by the first light, so they too pinned us in their beams. On all my missions I had never experienced a situation like this--a nightmare of flame, flashing lights, bursting anti-air-craft shells, and the smell of smoke and fire. [Editor's note: We skip again.]

"Did any of you guys see any of our planes in trouble?" The right gunner spoke, "I saw one 29 take a hit from flak and it looked like the wing came off. I could not see any chutes before I lost sight of him." The tail gunner reported that he saw a plane on fire, just a ball of flames, but he couldn't tell what it was, whether it was a 29 or one of the Nip fighters. The tone of voice of all our crewmen indicated the awesome devastation they were witnessing, a picture of horror and carnage... Not until later did I think about the women, children, the old, the sick, the non-combatants trapped in the funeral pyre of the city of Tokyo. More people died that night than in any other single incident of the war, including the dropping of either of the two cataclysmic bombs that were destined for later in the war.

Right on our flight path was a black area. As we plunged into the stygian darkness, it was as though a giant hand had grabbed our plane and was attempting to tear it to shreds. We had entered the smoke cloud from the burning city, and I had never experienced such turbulence, not even in the most vicious thunderstorm. I yelled for the copilot to get on the controls with me, and we had no thought of trying to maintain altitude or direction. We were just struggling to keep the plane from turning on its back. The wild gyrations continued for what seemed an eternity until we emerged from

the other side, and although it had been only a few minutes, both of us were exhausted and shaken from the fight to keep our 29 in the air.

As we passed over Tokyo Bay, we could see a rotating beacon on the surface of the water. Our radio operator called on intercom, "There is a 29 ditching in the bay, and that signal is from an American sub so the plane can ditch close to that spot." The nerve of that sub captain, taking his vessel right into Tokyo Bay and then surfacing, lighting his rotating beacon to guide the crippled bomber. The Navy was on the Job!

Memories of James O'Keefe, Bombardier, 25th Bomb Squadron (written about 1982)  
THE GREAT SEARCHLIGHT

"Now what?" we all wondered as we filed in to hear a special critique and briefing. A number of us were still shaking from the mission of May 24, 1945, when the anti-aircraft guns and night fighters in and around Tokyo had inflicted heavy losses on the B-29's. Shaking also from what we had seen of the hell created by our incendiary bombs that night. We were to go back to that city almost immediately, and the crews who were scheduled for the mission were not envied by the others.

Strange sightings had been reported to the intelligence officers at the interrogations following the May 24 mission. Discounting overwrought imaginations and the tricks which night shadows play on the vision, there was still evidence that something new and ominous in the way of a night fighter had been present in the skies over Tokyo in the early morning hours. We could account for many of our lost planes for they had been seen going down. But some had disappeared with no trace. Over the target several blinding explosions, many times greater than ordinary flak bursts, had been observed, and we now suspected that the planes unaccounted for had vanished in them.

Our intelligence officers sorted through the interrogation reports, details of a crude, small aircraft captured on Okinawa, radio messages broadcast by raving Japanese military leaders, and came up with...the baka bomb, a suicide plane which could be launched from the belly of a bomber such as the Betty, a standard Japanese medium bomber. Aside from the demented pilot, the plane carried a warhead weighing close to a ton, rocket fuel sufficient to keep the plane airborne for half an hour, and a rising sun flag, presumably to be waved exultantly in the last few seconds before the explosion which would atomize the baka, its pilot, and its unfortunate target.

"The baka can be aimed and released at you when you're caught in and illuminated by ground searchlights. But before you come in range of those searchlights beware of the mother plane which we think also carries a powerful searchlight capable of picking you up at a distance. And of course if the mother plane is one of the fast Bettys, it can keep up with you, hold you in its light while its baka is released and overtakes you. And...uh..." The intelligence officer's voice trailed away, "You're welcome to look at these diagrams and pictures of this..uh..new weapon."

He knew what we wanted from him--a means of dealing with a suicide attack. We knew about the appalling losses suffered by our Navy off Okinawa and that the losses were due primarily to kamikaze attacks. But there were no satisfactory tactics that he or anyone could devise for us, and we had no new, ingenious weapons that could neutralize the bakas. Like the Navy we would have to stand up to them, fight back with our present armament, and hope that at their present stage of development the new suicide craft would be clumsy and crude enough so that we could evade them.

The following evening we took off, once more heading for Tokyo with the diagrams and pictures of the crude but deadly baka vivid in our minds. Hours later, in the early morning, we crossed the

Japanese coastline--a landfall that always set the nerves on edge. Passing Mt. Fujiyama, easily visible at night, we picked up the IP and began the forty mile run to Tokyo. An alert, thinking enemy had seen only too well the advantages to us of this upwind approach, and had lined it with searchlights and anti-aircraft weapons of all kinds. Given the rage and fury of the people below us I could even picture slingshot brigades preparing to loose rocks at us.

One of our gunners now went to the rear hatch with sacks of "window," metallic strips which, when thrown out, would drift slowly downward and cloud up the radar scopes with which the searchlight crews and anti-aircraft gunners would try to track us. Searchlights picked us up immediately, and out the hatch went the "window." Bricks thrown at the searchlights would have been more useful. Radar was not needed to spot us on such a clear night, and once the lights caught us they clung to us tenaciously, and with maddening precision and skill each searchlight crew passed us on to the next light on the run.

Now the guns opened up. At an altitude of 9,000 feet we were in range of medium and light anti-aircraft weapons as well as the heavy guns. The plane shook from direct hits. Before we reached the city, shells took out one engine, aerated both wings, set fire to incendiary bombs in both bomb bays, and punctured and shredded so many parts that only by prayer and luck did we stay airborne. Not one of us was scratched--a miracle, I think. The minutes, always long on a bomb run, dragged and dragged. Finally we staggered over the city where rising smoke obscured us from the infuriating searchlights. The final seconds of the bomb run ticked off; then the bombs went away to add to the inferno and horror below us. Thermal updrafts now tossed us violently. 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 the 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 searchlight 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 calibre-50 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 toward 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.

There was yet another miracle that morning--our plane held together all the way home to Tinian. Rod landed it gently and with tenderness, but while taxiing to our hardstand it seemed to sigh with weariness and hurt, then it shuddered and collapsed. It never flew again.

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 from the initial point to the city. Cruellest and most sickening of all sights that night--the B-29 with one engine on fire which had been turned into flaming wreckage by the guns of hysterical gunners on another B-29.

We left the interrogation room and sought out our cots. Sleep did not come to me. Struggling to put the horrors of the mission out of mind, I turned to humor, the counterpoise that preserves sanity. 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 caliber 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 hangers (temperatures of 900 degrees Fahrenheit 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.

Editors' Postscript: The editors of Memories are William A. Rooney and Robert L. Hall, 517 ½ Ridge Road, Wilmette, IL 60091. Write to us. We still want you to send us your memories of any events from the 40th Bomb Group. Soon we expect, for example, to have an issue with recollections of the "Battle of Kansas," early in 1944.

Publication of Memories is dependent on contributions to pay for printing and mailing. If you want to help pay these expenses, make a check to 40th Bomb Group Association, and mail it to M. E. Carmichael, Treasurer, 2514 Oregon Avenue, Alamogordo, NM 88310. Remember also that Harry Changnon is 40th Group Historian. His address is: 10455 Westacres Drive, Cupertino, CA 95014.



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