

MOS 580—CFC: T/SGT. Kenneth Bender

The crew that I was on was headed by our aircraft commander Robert E. May. We had been issued a brand new B-29 just out of the factory modification center in Herrington, Kansas. We flew it to Sacramento, CA, then to Honolulu, Kwa-jalein, and on to Guam. While we were settling in and going through orientation one of the bomb group crews that was having their plane worked on was assigned to fly our new plane on a mission with their group. They were shot down and crashed in Tokyo Bay. This wasn't a good way to begin our overseas experience.

We flew our first two missions out of the 3rd Photo Recon Squadron in planes identified as #811 for the first mission and #900 for the second mission. We were living at Depot Field (later renamed Harmon Field after Gen. Harmon went down on a flight between Hawaii and Guam—more about this later); but flew out of North Field as "tail end Charlie" behind a group from the 314th Wing that was going on a bombing mission. I don't know which of the four groups of the 314th Wing we were following. I have a list of all the missions flown by the 330th in my copy of the booklet that was given to each of us after the war ended. It lists a mission on April 30th to TOMITAKA AIRFIELD with 12 aircraft bombing and 49,000 tons of bombs dropped; however, my notes list our first mission as May 1st so I doubt if it was the 330th that we followed that day. I wish I knew because of what happened as we were taxiing in line waiting for our turn to take off; here is the story: the taxi strip was parallel to the runway and a short distance to one side. B-29's were lined up on the taxi strip inching along in the opposite direction as the planes that were taking off. As each plane reached the head of the taxi strip it crossed over to the runway and began its takeoff roll at one minute intervals on a green light signal from the control tower. Since this was happening on two parallel runways it meant that one plane was leaving the ground at the opposite end of the runway every 30 seconds. Since we were last on the taxi strip we were watching each plane as it came dangerously near the end of the 10,200 foot runway before it got its wheels off of the ground. There was about a quarter of a mile between the end of the runway and the edge of the island. At this point the island ended with a 500 foot cliff. Once a plane was over the edge of the cliff it was 500 feet in the air. As each plane reached this point it lowered its nose and reduced altitude in order to gain air speed and we saw it disappear below the cliff and then reappear in the distance as it again began to regain altitude. While we were watching we saw one plane disappear over the cliff and then there was a terrific explosion as it hit the water and the sky lit up like high noon. It was actually about 2:00 o'clock in the morning. I was listening to the control tower frequency through my ear phones and heard the rescue boat under the cliff report no survivors when all of a sudden our number three engine burst into flames. Each engine had CO2 piped to it from a canister in the nose wheel well and the flight engineer had controls to direct it to the engine that was on fire. This was done and in a few minutes the fire was out but not before I could feel the heat of the flames rushing past my blister. The pilot and co-pilot had immediately shut down the engine and feathered the prop. We all listened nervously again to the tower frequency as our pilot reported the situation and requested permission to abort the mission and return to our hard stand. The tower operator said to stay in line while he informed the colonel. A few moments later the colonel came on the radio and said to restart the engine and check it out. Everything checked ok and we flew the mission. An hour or two after takeoff we saw a B-29 headed back toward Guam with one engine out. Shortly after that there came another one. To say the least this was not a confidence builder; but we continued on and flew the mission with no problems.

More about my reference to General Harmon: When word was received that his plane was either missing or ditched a massive air sea rescue search was organized. The ocean in the vicinity of their last radio contact was divided into grids and every plane that could fly was assigned a particular grid to search. As luck would have it we spotted a life raft in the grid that we were searching. We radioed the position and began circling overhead so as not to lose sight of the tiny speck in the water. We could see the men waving their arms. A twin engine sea plane (PBY) arrived after a period of time; but the waves were so heavy that it sank when it tried to land in the water. Now we had more men in the water waiting for rescue. We radioed these happenings and since we had been on station about as long as our fuel supply would permit another plane was dispatched to take our place and hold the position until a navy ship could reach the spot. Since the number of men in the original raft was not even half of the men that had been on board General Harmon's plane, all the other B-29's continued searching their grids, each being replaced by a refueled plane as their fuel ran low. The men we had been circling



over were eventually picked up by a surface vessel but General Harmon was not among them. No other survivors were ever found and the search was eventually called off.

We were trained as a replacement crew at Clovis Army Air Base in Clovis, New Mexico. In the fall of 1944 when we were about half way through our training an urgent call came from the Pacific Theatre that the 3rd Photo Recon Squadron had suffered unusually heavy losses and were in need of replacements. While we continued our regular training schedule we were also trained in Photo Reconnaissance and had a photographer added as a crew member. By the time we arrived on Guam on April 12, 1945 (the same day the 330th flew its first mission) we found that the 3rd Photo Recon Squadron hadn't lost any more planes and now had a surplus; never-the-less, we flew our first two missions on May 1st and May 11th out of the 3rd Photo Recon Squadron. On May 26th, we were transferred to the 459th Squadron of the 330th Bomb Group. Because of our training in reconnaissance we were assigned a weather man as another member of our crew and for the remainder of the war we did most of the reconnaissance, both photo and weather for the 330th Bomb Group. We did bomb assessment photography which was used to decide if a target had been sufficiently destroyed or if another mission had to be planned to finish the job. We had 3 huge cameras (tri-metrigon) mounted in the rear of the plane. The center camera pointed straight down and one on each side was at a slight angle; after almost 70 years, I am going to guess at a 30 degree angle. Each camera had a lot of film and they were timed to take continuous photos at some certain second intervals based on the planes ground speed. When we returned from each mission the photo lab had a jeep waiting and those fellows along with our photo navigator removed the film from our cameras and took it to the photo lab for processing. After these pictures were developed they were laid out on a big table slightly larger than a ping-pong table and pieced together to make a picture of the ground over which we had been flying. Even when taken from high altitude these were very clear pictures and one could easily identify things on the ground. We also did photo mapping for headquarters to lay out future missions.

At the same time we flew north across the Sea of Japan and along the coast of Korea taking weather observations because the weather in that area was determined to be the weather that would be over Japan the next day and the location of "fronts", the direction of air currents and their speed and direction could help predict when and where weather would be good for bombing. Our missions were considerably longer than a typical bombing mission and we usually carried "bomb bay fuel tanks" instead of bombs to keep us in the air for those extra hours. Sometimes we took off and flew all



alone while other times we took off and flew to Japan with our squadron and as the rest dropped their bombs and turned for home we continued on alone to carry out our assigned mission. One such mission, on July 9th (our 11th mission and the 330th's 37th mission) the bombing target had been the city of GIEFU, Japan. Our assignment was to continue on over Shikoku and then return direct to Guam. Instead, after a suggestion by one of the crew members and discussion among ourselves, it was decided to return back over Giefu and take bomb assessment photos which might keep us from having to return again within the next few days. We were being paced by several enemy fighters which was always a little more worrisome when we were all alone than when we had the mutual firepower of the whole squadron, and just as we neared the target area and could see fires from the earlier bombing, one of our engines started backfiring and lost power. After a quick conversation on the intercom we decided to keep on going over the target and get the pictures. We did this and continued on to Guam where we landed almost out of fuel. When we landed we found out that for some reason it was thought that the bombing mission had been unsuccessful and a repeat mission was already being planned to finish the job. Our film was rushed to the photo lab where it showed (as we had seen first hand) that the target had been completely destroyed. The repeat mission was cancelled and each of us on the crew was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. The citation read (along with the usual stuff) that by eliminating the need for a repeat mission it may have resulted in the saving of lives and equipment. Needless to say we were all proud.



After we moved from the 3rd Photo Recon Squadron to the 330th Bomb Group we began flying K42. We flew this plane on our 3rd-4th-5th- and 6th missions. Then for some reason we took K66 on our 7th mission. We lost power in #1 engine over Kyushu; then we lost oil out of #4 and had to feather it. #2 began running hot and we couldn't maintain altitude above 17,000 feet. We flew back to Iwo Jima and had an escort of four P-51 fighters to bring us in. The ship was repaired, refueled and we flew back to Guam. We flew K66 again on our 8th mission after which it was returned to the 3rd Photo Recon Squadron. After this K42 was assigned to us as our own plane. Mission #10 took us over Okinawa and into China. We carried packets of Chinese money, Chinese Pointie-talkie and blood chits. Mission #14 took us over Kobe, Osaka and Nagoya. We picked up several enemy fighters along the way but they stayed out of range of our guns; however, this kept us very alert for a long period of time. Then just before dawn we were picked up by search lights. On mission #15 we saw U.S. carrier based navy planes over Kure and Yawata. We were afraid they wouldn't recognize us so we used our IFF. Mission #17 we got a brand new plane just over from the states. It was given the number K66. (I don't know what happened to the old K66). We named it "City of Alhambra - Weathering Heights III". Our pilot's home town was Alhambra, Calif. and this had recently been made the program for naming. We took her to Tokyo and Yokohama on this mission. Mission #18 in our new plane was another exciting mission for us and took place on August 10th. At 11:01 on the morning of August 9th the second Atomic Bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. In the early morning hours of August 10th we took off to take 24 hour bomb assessment photos. Deputy Wing Commander Colonel Sheffield flew with us to oversee the photography and Captain Giboney flew as our tail gunner since our tail gunner Sgt. Bill McGary was D.N.I.F. Our assignment was to first photograph Hiroshima and then be over Nagasaki at 11:01 to take the 24hour bomb assessment photographs. Hiroshima was covered by clouds, but Nagasaki was wide open. I quote from notes I made on our return to Guam, "Fires were burning around the outskirts and the city looked like a huge pile of ashes. It was really ruined. Smoke 25 miles wide and 100 miles long reached to 10,000 ft. - from Nagasaki to Kanoya. Empire very clear and saw many ruined airfields on Kyushu. Only saw one fighter". We were surprised that there was no attempt to shoot us down because on two previous occasions a single B-29 flying over Japan had dropped an Atomic Bomb. We were afraid that they would expect the same from us.

Still another interesting mission was a mercy mission on August 31st. This mission was flown in K-65, but I don't remember why, probably K-66 was having some maintenance. Plans were in progress for the final surrender to take place aboard the battleship Missouri on September 2nd but because of food shortages in Japan American prisoners of war being held in Japan were in immediate need of food and medical supplies. The Japanese gave permission for the United States to drop these supplies by parachute, but would not give permission to land on their soil until the final agreements were signed. We built platforms that could be hoisted up into our bomb bays using the bomb loading cables. Big packages of supplies with a parachute attached on top of each were placed on these platforms and then the platforms were hoisted into the bomb bays and held in place by the bomb release mechanisms. We were to drop our supplies to a prisoner of war camp known as Osaka #4. Our directions were very poor and we were using an old National Geographic map of Japan to try to locate the camp. We had a lot of trouble finding it due to rough terrain and quite a bit of cloud cover. We kept going lower and lower and back and forth. When we finally found it we broke out of the clouds so low that we almost crashed into the side of a mountain, and then into a high power line. We could see the P.W.'s in the compound waving their arms and running around. The gates were wide open and I saw someone, I suppose a Japanese riding a bicycle on a road near the camp. As we roared overhead he jumped off of the bicycle and dove into a ditch along side of the road. We climbed as fast as we could, circled around away from the mountain, flew back over the camp at between 400 and 500 feet and released the platforms in the same manner as dropping bombs. Each parachute had a long rope tied to the rip cord with the other end tied to the bomb rack. We saw most of the parachutes open ok, but we were almost too low and a couple of them failed to open before hitting the ground. We could see the prisoners running around gathering them up. As we turned to start back home we found that we couldn't close the bomb bay doors because the ropes used to pull the rip cords had tangled around the door closing cylinders as the slip stream whipped them around and around. When you are flying with the bomb bay doors open they hold you back just like big sails would. We knew that there was no way we would have enough gas to make it back even to Iwo Jima with that much drag on the engines, so we radioed for permission to land at one of the airfields on Kyushu. Headquarters denied the request and gave us directions to fly as far as we could constantly radioing our position and they would try to have a submarine of air sea rescue as near as possible to where we would have to ditch when we ran out of gas. This idea wasn't appealing to any of us so Capt. May ordered me to go into the bomb bay and try to untangle or cut loose the ropes so that the bombardier could close the doors. There wasn't room for me to squeeze between the side of the plane and the bomb rack if I had a parachute on, so I went out without a chute and was almost pulled out by the slip stream. One of the blister gunners lay on his stomach and pulled my feet back inside. I tied a rope around my waist and went out again, this time on my hands and knees, and was successful. We had used so much fuel flying around looking for the camp that even with the doors closed we barely had enough fuel to get back to Guam. We were given mission credit for this flight and it was our 21st completed mission.

Our 22nd and final mission was the show of force on September 2nd. This was 5 days before my 20th birthday on September 7th. Quoting again from notes that I made on our return to Guam: "We flew over Tokyo twice very low. I saw what was left of the emperors palace. Tokyo was in ruins. Buzzed up Tokyo Bay and got a good look at our navy. Saw the battleship Missouri on which they were signing the peace. Our formation was very poor. Everywhere there were B-29's.

World War II was over.

Before returning to the states there were two more flights that I didn't make notes on and consequently don't know what the dates were. One was a trip to Okinawa after a typhoon had wrecked havoc on that island. Again the ground crew built platforms for the bomb bays and they were filled with supplies and we flew them to Okinawa. We landed there and were unloaded by Japanese prisoners. We brought back to Guam a group of "high point" soldiers who then boarded ships back to the states.

The second flight was sometime in October. We were told that the Japanese had been allowed to remain in control in Korea because no agreement had been reached with the Russians as to who would occupy what part, but that agreement had now been made and that they would come down to the 38th parallel and we would go up to that line. Obviously they already knew at that time that this was a trouble spot because groups of B-29's flew back and forth below the 38th parallel while each side occupied their territory.

Sometime in September or October K-66 had an engine change and we were going to take it up to "slow time" the engine to break it in. While we were doing our pre flight inspection (I was on top checking the upper aft turret) a B-29 was coming in for a landing and just after it touched the ground someone in a weapons carrier (vehicle larger than a jeep and smaller than a 6 X 6) crossed the runway in front of it. I feel sure he would have made it if the pilot would have continued his landing, but instead the pilot increased his engines to full power in an attempt to take off again. The engines took hold unevenly and the right wing lifted faster than the left wing and the left wing being down caused the plane to veer to the left and leave the runway. It just got high enough to clear our tail and then crashed a short distance beyond. It broke in two just behind the aft bomb bay and bodies flew out. We were devastated and hoped we wouldn't have to fly right then, but the Group C.O. said "get in the air right now before you have time to think about it". We did, and everything was alright.

We flew back to the states right before Thanksgiving. Landed at Sacramento and were bussed up to camp Stoneman near San Francisco. We were split up there and that's the last I ever saw of any of my old crew. I was put on a troop train for St Louis and arrived at Jefferson Barracks after seven days and seven nights on a sit up train. Several of us exchanged Christmas cards for a year or two but after a while that fell by the way side. I'm sorry now that I have no contact with any of them.