

## MOS 200—Communications Officer: Col Howard R McKendrick

A short while after our daughter, Patti, was born, I received my first orders as an officer in the Army Air Corps; I was on my way to Hayes, Kansas to serve as a communication-electronics officer in the 330<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. Our group was equipped with new B-29 Bombers. I had a million things to do - getting involved and understanding the magnitude of my new duties. I had a group of enlisted men assigned to my section; most of them had just completed their communications training on the equipment we would be servicing on our B-29s. We were all of an age and it was amazing how well we bonded as a unit. We blended in with the other components of the group and began a long and sometimes difficult training period, but by the time we received our orders to proceed to our overseas destination we were a well-oiled machine. Names elude me at this point, but I will never forget the name my top sergeant. He was older than I and had been in the service for several years. Sergeant Hoe took me under his wing and helped make my initiation in a position of leadership a success. His guidance was always on my mind as I proceeded up the ladder.

The routine continued to be hectic but now was the time to get my wife, Peg, and the baby to Kansas. Hayes was a small Kansas town with a military population growing by day. I spent as much of my spare time as possible hunting an apartment for Peg and the baby. Luck came my way and I found an attic apartment with a farm family that made our stay in Hayes a delightful experience. Peg boarded a train and made her way to Kansas. Patti was now 6 months old and required a lot of attention. Train travel during the war was a trying experience, but we were determined to keep our family together as long as possible knowing that I would soon be leaving the states for our overseas destination. May and Leon Wenger took us in and in time we felt like one of the family. The Wengers operated a large wheat farm and used German prisoner labor, a common practice in that area. Leon picked up his quota of prisoners in the morning and was responsible for them throughout the day including providing food. May prepared the food and Peg helped by serving the food. The first day Peg helped serve; there was a lot of excited conversation among the prisoners. Through an interpreter he told her she was considered a hussy because she was wearing lipstick. He was able to convince them she was a good American lady. The training program and duties at the airbase were taking more and more of my time. This included a week away on a training exercise in Dalhart, Texas and then a longer trip to Batista Field, Havana, Cuba. In Havana we established a base similar to our overseas location. Two things stand out on the Cuban trip:

Our aircraft were located next to revetments of another bomb group going through the same type of training; however, their aircraft were a modified configuration. We were ordered not to approach their revetments. Our curiosity was solved many months later because one of their aircraft was named the Enola Gay. One of my assignments at Batista Field was to establish a communication system to serve the B-29 revetments. We laid cable to link each revetment and to the service centers used by the maintenance crews. The system was complete with hand cranked telephones and a small switchboard. My first telephone system was a huge success.

In late March of 1945 we were alerted and prepared for the move to North Field, Guam. Our B-29s were flown over by the crews and all the maintenance personnel by C-54 aircraft from Hamilton Air Field, San Francisco, CA. We departed Hamilton Field early on the morning of 12 April 1945 but not before enjoying an evening at the Mark Hopkins Hotel. Our destination on the first leg was to Honolulu and in 1945 that was an 8-hour flight. A historic event happened during our flight to Honolulu. I had put on headsets hoping to pick up music or news just to pass a little time. An announcer came on and in a very somber voice announced that President Roosevelt had died; President Truman had already been sworn in as President of the United States. The mood in the aircraft was somber for the rest of the flight. The next leg of our journey took us to Johnson Island about 4-5 hours from Honolulu. The island was very small and at that time used solely as a refueling stop. I'm sure you could stand in the middle of the runway and throw a rock in the Pacific Ocean on either side. To add a thrill, the approach to the island was at high tide and our touchdown was in about a foot of water. The next leg of our journey was a long hop to Kwajalein; next stop, our home base, North Field, Guam in the Marianas. We arrived about midnight after 39 flying hours from San Francisco. Tired, dirty, and hungry we were rescued by the mess sergeant who led us to a banquet, Guam style. We found a tent by flashlight and crashed, but were up and ready to go shortly after daybreak. Our group had already been tasked and within the next few hours would be on their way to targets in the Tokyo area. We didn't have time to get acclimated, it was full bore everyday. Life was hectic on Guam for a while. Our group flew missions about every two or three days and those of us in the support role tried to make life more comfortable. A construction battalion moved in and built four man huts, a headquarters building, workshops, laundry and just about all the facilities needed for a small community. Out of the blue, two giant generators appeared, poles were set, power lines put up, and we were in business. We took it upon ourselves to build an officer's club, enlisted club, and a theater. Getting material for them was a problem but we were successful in diverting truck loads of lumber

to our base. I used the term divert rather than hijacking but it proved very easy to convince a truck driver the building material was really meant for us. The trick was to get them on the manifest for a mission over Japan. It worked like a charm and at times there were more truck drivers losing their way than we could handle; however due to the number of misdirected truck drivers, we had the best theater on the island. I wonder if we could do that in today's air force. The one thing we lacked was refrigeration, except in the mess hall. Beer was plentiful and it was stacked high in the tents; I learned to enjoy warm beer. Food was another problem; you could be assured Spam was on the menu. I ate Spam prepared every way possible. We did a lot of trading with the Navy; their ships were loaded with good food. Maintaining good relationships with the naval officers was a top priority. All that added to our comfort but the real effort was to maintain our aircraft and meet the stringent requirements demanded by the Commanding General of the 20<sup>th</sup> Air Force, General Curtis LeMay.

Preparation for a mission required close coordination with other bomb groups located on Tinian and Saipan. Our aircraft had the longest mission as we were further south in the Marianas chain. My role in all this was to supervise maintenance of the communication gear on board the aircraft and to play a role in the operation side of the house by briefing aircrews on communication requirements of the mission and emergency procedures available. I was normally on the flight line when the aircraft were departing. It was a great sight to see B-29s lining up with engines running ready for the long flight to Japan. Waiting for their return was a tense time, hoping all would return with little or no damage. Unfortunately, as in all conflicts there were times we lost an aircraft and crew over the target area and there were times when aircraft were lost to mechanical problems. The one loss that comes to mind even after all these years happened at our airbase. One of our aircraft had been hit over Japan but had made it back with severe damage. The aircraft commander called in for an emergency straight in approach and was on final touchdown when the left wing hit the ground and the aircraft exploded with the loss of the aircraft and crew. The final farewell to the crew was said at the club bar that night. We did not dwell on our losses for obvious reasons.

Since I had responsibility for the radio operators I requested permission to sign on and make one of the missions. I made the flight on the aircraft "Yonkee Doll-ah". Ours was the Pathfinder mission which goes in well in advance of the main group and radios back weather conditions over the target area, fighter opposition, and anything else significant as the aircraft made their turn over the targets. I made no special preparation for the mission but I soon learned the duties of our aircrews were no easy task. I was asked to make a test broadcast back to the Naval Station on Guam which in turn was relayed to one of the major networks in New York. The idea being, if the test was successful they would assign a correspondent on one of the flights for a live broadcast. I did that as we left the mainland of Japan for safety reasons. I never learned whether it was successful or not. (*Editors Note: It was! See story on page 6*).

Back to my flight, it was my first flight in a B-29 and as we rolled down the runway it seemed to take forever for the aircraft to gain lift. As we flew over the cliffs the pilot nosed down toward the ocean 500 feet below to gain a little speed and then we began the long pull to gain altitude. I can assure you, that was quite a thrill. Our flight path was up over the islands of Tinian, then Saipan. A little later, Iwo Jima came into view and at that point we turned west toward Japan. We were approaching Japan around sundown and at seventy five to eighty miles from the Japanese mainland I could see Mt. Fujiyama rising about the clouds. A truly beautiful sight and it is at those moments you feel a little sorry to be on a mission of destruction. It was at this point we put on the flak jackets and prepared for the run over the target area. It was also at this time my heartbeat rose at a rapid rate. We rounded Mt. Fuji and started the run that covered the Tokyo and Yokahama areas. At this time I wondered if I had made a mistake in volunteering for this mission. My hats are off to the crews, they made this type of mission time and time again. The mission was exciting but uneventful; by uneventful I mean we encountered no flak or fighter activity and no aircraft maintenance problems. I can't speak for the bombers following us dropping on their assigned targets. We made our way back and landed safely at our home base. The total trip was about 12 hours and I was one very tired airman.

I departed Guam in early 1946, flew to Saipan and was offered an opportunity to return to the states on an aircraft carrier. I had been promoted to Captain and was in line for more challenging duties. We were several days crossing the Pacific Ocean but this was a new and enjoyable experience. We landed in Los Angeles and for those of us who were to be reassigned, our transportation was by train on the Silver Limited to Chicago and on to the east coast. We were treated royally with compartment accommodations. I arrived home for a short vacation and enjoyed a reunion never to be forgotten.

I was then assigned to Fort Hamilton, NY for a few days for further assignment. My new duty station was Dover Army Air Field, Dover, Delaware, 45 miles from home. Peg, Patti, and I rented a cottage at a beach resort near Dover and spent four wonderful months together. All this came to an abrupt end when I was told my new assignment was with the occupation forces in Japan. I was given just a few days to prepare and depart for Salt Lake

City, Utah. We were transported to Seattle, WA and boarder the USS Ainsworth. It was about an eight day trip to Yokohama where we reported to the Army Replacement Depot. From there by train to a temporary airfield in Fu-kuoka on the southern island of Kyushu and finally a permanent assignment to the 8th Fighter Wing at Ashiya on the Northern tip of Kyushu.

