

# **ATOMIC BOMB AWAY**

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**G**UAM. THE MARIANAS—It was 0245 when the colonel eased forward on the throttle. The B-29 with *Enola Gay* printed in big block letters on her nose vibrated and began to roll forward. She reached 100 mph in a hurry, then picked up additional speed more slowly. She used up half the runway, and she was still bearing down hard on her spinning tires.

The tail gunner, S/Sgt. George Caron, up near the waist for the take-off, began to sweat it out. Capt. Robert A. Lewis, who usually piloted the *Enola Gay*, would have had her off the ground by this time. But Cap Lewis was only co-pilot on this trip and Caron didn't know the colonel, Col. Paul W. (Old Bull) Tibbets Jr., who had the controls now.

The *Enola Gay* neared the end of the runway and was almost on the gravel when she lifted gently into the dark sky. Caron realized suddenly that the colonel had been fighting to hold the ship on the ground the whole length of the runway just to be absolutely safe. And Caron remembered the bomb.

The men knew about the bomb—that it was something special—but they didn't know it was the atomic bomb. It was important, they knew, too, for in addition to Col. Tibbets' taking over for the trip, there was a Capt. William S. Parsons of the Navy aboard. He was a bomb expert of some kind and had come along as an observer.

Sgt. Joe Steiborik, radar operator, a dark husky Texan who was almost uncannily adept at operating his precision instruments, called the pilot on the intercom and told him he would find a large cloud north of the next island. "Better stay away from it, Colonel," he said. "It's pretty turbulent."

Fifteen minutes later the colonel came to the rear to use the tube. Before the trip was over he was to make a dozen or more such trips. "Coffee," was all he would say. "Drink so damn much of it."

Pfc. Richard H. Nelson, a boyish redhead who looks like every kid in every breakfast cereal advertisement ever printed, settled down to read "Watch Out for Willie Carter," a boxing story. Nelson was teased pretty constantly about his reading, just as he was teased about almost everything. The youngest man on the crew ("I've been 20 for over two months"), he had been nicknamed "Junior" by the four other men of the plane crew. Before the flight was over Junior finished the Willie Carter novel.

The flight engineer, S/Sgt. Wyatt E. Duzenbury of Lansing, Mich., a quiet 32-year-old thin-faced fellow with big ears, sat at his control panel reading innumerable gauges. A pure, undiluted flight engineer. Deuce's only concern during the flight was to wonder how the big explosion would affect his gauges. "He's dial happy," say the others.

Up front sat Col. Tibbets, a young (33) man with an accumulation of war flying experience. He was the pilot of the first B-17 to fly over the English Channel on a bombing mission; he flew Gen. Mark Clark to Gibraltar, he flew Gen. Eisenhower to Gibraltar, and then he flew Gen. Doolittle to Gibraltar; he flew Gen. Clark and Canada's Gen. McNaughton to Algiers, landing on a field he knew would be bombed, and which was actually under attack, before he stopped taxi-ing; he led the first mission to bomb North Africa; returned to the U. S., he flew the first B-29 on test missions; he was made CO of the atomic bomb outfit forming at Wendover, Utah; and now, sitting at the controls of the *Enola Gay*, he was on his way to drop the first atomic bomb in history.

The co-pilot was Cap Lewis, the plane's usual pilot. He had flown four missions against Japan in the *Enola Gay* with this crew. The crewmen all call him Cap, and he is an easy man to know and an easy one to like.

The navigator was Capt. Red (Dutch) Van Kirk, a young Pennsylvanian with a crew haircut that gives him a collegiate look. Van Kirk is

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**Col. Tibbets**



**Maj. Ferebee**



**S/Sgt. Caron**



**Pfc. Nelson**

a good friend of Maj. Tom W. Ferebee, the bombardier, and they had flown together in North Africa and England, usually as navigator and bombardier for Col. Tibbets. They were in on most of the colonel's firsts, and he brought them into his atomic unit as soon as he got it.

The flight was well along now, and Caron, the tail gunner, remembering Cap Lewis' prodigious appetite, crawled forward through the tunnel to get to the food before the co-pilot ate it all. Caron found six apples among the food up forward and threw these the length of the tunnel to Shumard, hoping that they would roll out of the tunnel and fall on a sleeping lieutenant who was flying this mission as special observer. He was Lt. M. U. Jeppson, an electronics officer. Caron wanted to wake him and get him to sit erect, thus taking less space in the waist, but none of the apples went the length of the tunnel, and the lieutenant kept on sprawling.

The flight to the target was routine, and only the thought of what they were going to see kept them active. They read, ate and talked a little and said nothing more historic than "Move over, you bastard, and give me some room," which must have been said on every plane ride since Orville said it to Wilbur at Kitty Hawk.

Occasionally they consulted the various charms and talismans, of which the *Enola Gay* had an inordinate number. These included, in addition to Caron's baseball hat and Shumard's pictures, the following items: Three pairs of silk panties from Omaha, stowed in one corner with a booklet on VD. One picture of Wendover Mary, a group companion during training in Utah. Wendover Mary had on a pair of high heeled shoes. One good conduct ribbon, fastened on the radio set and owned by Junior. Six prophylactic kits, divided equally between Van Kirk and Ferebee and presented by the ground crew in case of forced landing in territory "where the natives are friendly." One ski cap purchased in Salt Lake City and worn by Steiborik. One picture of the lobby of the Hotel Utah at Salt Lake, where Ferebee formed many associations, all of limited length but definite purpose. One lipstick kissprint on the nose, signed "Dottie" and bearing a dateline, "Omaha, onetime," placed there by a civilian girl who worked at an Omaha air base: it had been shellacked over promptly for permanence—source of the crew's common prayer, "Omaha, one more time."

These things were all very important to the *Enola Gay* community and were a binding force. A series of good drunks together in the States had helped weld them into a unit, and they were all very close friends.

They were getting near the target now, and Caron went back to the tail, taking his K-20

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along. The plane began to climb, and they pressurized the cabin. The bombardier and the navigator, veterans of 54 and 63 missions, weren't worried about their imminent work, though it dawned on the navigator, Van Kirk, that "I'd be the biggest ass in the Air Force if I missed the target." They passed over several secondary targets and found them visible, then continued into Hiroshima. They saw it, lined it up, opened the bomb-bay doors, made the bomb run, and let the bomb fall. The plane banked sharply to the right and every one craned to look out.

Back at the right waist window, Sgt. Bob Shumard, the assistant flight engineer, turned his polaroids to full intensity and prepared to take advantage of the fact that he had the best seat for the show. When the bomb went off it looked blue through his polaroids, but he noted that the interior of the plane lighted up as though flash bulbs had been set off inside the cabin. He adjusted his polaroids to mild intensity and looked down at Hiroshima. A large white cloud was spreading rapidly over the whole area, obscuring everything and rising very rapidly. Shumard shouted into the intercom: "There it goes, and it's coming right back at us."

Looking way down again, he noted that outside the smoke circle and racing ahead of it were three large concentric circles. These appeared to Shumard to be heat rings, since they looked like the transparent wavy vapors seen coming off hot objects. He craned to see what happened to them, but the lieutenant who had been asleep was now awake and was climbing all over Shumard's neck. He lost the rings during this interval and could not find them again.

The engineer noted that his instruments were still functioning normally, and then he looked out his little hatch. He said nothing.

When Steiborik got no instrument reaction to the blast, he looked too.

"Jesus Christ," said Lt. Jeppson, "if people knew what we were doing we could have sold tickets for \$100,000."

Van Kirk said nothing, though newspaper reports later called him "a battle-hardened veteran who exclaimed 'My God!'" when he saw the blast. The crew still kid him about this.

Ferebee, the bombardier, felt only one reaction: he was damn glad to be rid of the bomb. Then he set to work filling out the strike report form which was to be radioed in:

Back in the tail Caron noted the turbulence and called to the pilot: "Colonel, it's coming towards us fast." He got no reply, but the plane changed its course and outdistanced the cloud.

They looked after it as long as they could see it, a great ringed cumulus-type shaft rising higher and higher through the clouds. Then they flew on and it was gone. The tail gunner called to the pilot: "Colonel, that was worth the 25c ride on the cyclone at Coney Island."

The colonel called back and said, "I'll collect the two bits when we land."

"You'll have to wait till pay day," said the tail gunner.

Maj. Ferebee filled out the strike report and gave it to Capt. Parsons who had been in charge of the bomb. Parsons took it to Junior:

"This report," said the captain, "is going directly to the President."

The Navy captain wondered aloud: "How can you destroy so much and sacrifice so little? We didn't even damage a plane."

Some of the men wondered how many it would take to make Japan surrender; everyone wondered if the one bomb would end the war. Finally they dozed off a little, talked a little and ate a little and engaged in brief flurries of speculation. But the *Enola Gay*, the plane that had been named by the crew for the colonel's mother as a gesture for the flight, flew on and on. "She sang," they say now, with the deep pride that airmen feel for a ground crew that can make a plane sing.

Deuce worried about fuel, but Cap kidded him out of it. Time dragged. Everyone got hungry. But then they saw the field, and they were alert again.

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"I looked at the Old Bull." says Cap Lewis. "and his eyes were bloodshot and he looked awful tired. He looked like the past 10 months, at Wendover, and Washington, and New Mexico, and overseas, had come up and hit him all at once.

"I says to him, 'Bull, after such a beautiful job. you better make a beautiful landing.

"And he did."

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