

August 6, 2007

Hello, Steam Team:

For most of my life it seemed that most of my contemporaries had been in the service during World War II. Now for some odd reason, there are not many of us left, and it has occurred to me that some adventures and “how it was” stories might be of interest. I was in the service for 46 months, but I was not a hero and was seldom in harm’s way. I was close to some historic events, however, and a few of these tales I shall relate here.

Having “graduated” from aerial weather observing school at Will Rogers Field in Oklahoma City, I was part of a 10-man crew that ferried a new B-24 bomber equipped for weather observing from Savannah, GA, to Guam in June, 1945. We joined the 55th Weather Reconnaissance Squadron which consisted of about 24 crews (like ours) and the supporting personnel needed to keep us flying, lodged and fed. Our squadron was located on Harmon Field on Guam and was part of the 20th Air Force, headquartered only about ½ mile away. The main effort of the 20th Air Force was to bomb the many targets in Japan, mainly from Guam, Tinian, and Saipan, all about 1600 miles and 8 hours away (one way). After the spring of 1945, B-29’s were used almost exclusively for these bombing raids. At the end of the Pacific campaign in August that year there were about 400,000 service men on Guam alone. The area occupied by various departments of the U.S. military was about 40 square miles, roughly half of Guam’s land area, and three major Army Air Fields plus a Naval Air Station had been built since Guam was retaken from the Japanese in July, 1944.

On August 6, 1945, we were flying our third weather mission from Guam, this time south and east of the island. Three other crews from our squadron would be flying in other quadrants from our base, each having 12-hour flights from 6 A.M. to 6 P.M., so that collectively our planes could cover a circular area about 1,300 miles in diameter. Theoretically, we could report on weather conditions in this large circle of the Pacific. We had radio communication for sending in coded hourly weather reports to headquarters, and special happenings or vital information would also be heard over the plane’s radio. About 2 P.M. on this August 6, word came through that a strange new bomb had been dropped on Japan, and that it was completely different from anything any of us had heard about or known of. When we landed at 6 P.M., we learned that the first atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. The “Enola Gay” and its crew had taken off from Tinian before daybreak and had dropped the devastating blast about noon. The second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki on August 9, and important things leading up to the official surrender in Tokyo Bay on September 2 started to happen rapidly.

On August 15 (the 14th on the U.S. mainland), the Japanese agreed to the initial terms of the surrender, and pandemonium broke out all over the country. Those of us close to the final actions couldn’t quite believe it was real, but we knew the Japanese could not hold out much longer, whether or not there was an atomic bomb. The bombing raids were terminated. A Marine unit that had been in the Pacific for 3 years was equipped with new uniforms, as they were to take part in the official war-ending ceremonies. For some reason they visited us at our Guam squadron headquarters enroute to Japan. Irving Berlin had anticipated the war’s end, as his “This Is The Army” show toured Guam about August 20-24 with a new musical finale about the boys going home.

Our squadron had a "Flight" (4 crews) at Iwo Jima, and we were sent there about August 28 for a 7-day stay. While there, it was anticipated that we would fly 2 or 3 weather missions over Japan as our rotating crews were doing. We knew the route: from Iwo to Tokyo Bay, thence west over the Japanese mainland, and return to Iwo Jima. Our pilot's name was on the board (that meant our crew of 10) to go on August 30. At the last minute, the flight was canceled. Then we were "up" for August 31; again we were canceled. The same thing happened for 2 more days, September 1 and September 2. Finally, on September 3 we went, one day after General MacArthur had accepted the Japanese surrender on the deck of the Battleship Missouri in Tokyo Bay. The word was out: during the precarious surrender negotiations, the top brass did not want any U.S. Air Force planes in Japanese air space as they would be feared as bombers.

Just before dark on September 2, there was a commotion about 100 yards from our tent on Iwo. A plane had landed for re-fueling and it carried General Jonathan Wainwright, a prisoner of the Japanese since the surrender of the Philippines in 1942, fresh from his participation in the surrender ceremony. Our crew had a memorable day on September 3, as without orders we extended our flight to nearly 14 hours. It was overcast over Tokyo, and we broke under the clouds at about 300 feet elevation. No one had a camera but I wrote continually, recording what we saw. Mount Fuji was there, above the clouds, and we flew toward the front yard of the Emperor's Palace. We saw a burned-out city with very few buildings standing, and the Battleship Missouri was still in Tokyo Bay. It was off-limits, but we flew right over the deck, anyway. Commuter trains were running, but passengers waiting on the station platforms ran for cover at the sight of our plane. Finally, traveling mostly in a heavy cloud cover, we looked down on Hiroshima, but we really could not see very much. It was dark when we landed back on Iwo Jima about 8 P.M. These were historic times.

Our work sessions last week were productive. The engine to go back in the H-5 is nearly re-assembled by Art Wallace and Jerry Lucas, and Walter Higgins plans to make new wrist pins next week. Butch and Steve Bryce worked again on the 735 and it was moved to the Museum Thursday night as most of the cars were put back in their permanent locations following the floor-painting project. Bill Rule and several helpers made progress on Norman Schaut's Model 61, and everything is now freed up after many years of being "frozen". A knock in the engine is of some concern and will be addressed this week. Steve Jensen and Anne Cleary have almost completed some track improvement at the end of the trestle, and Lou Mandich brought us another load of shingles from the London Grove Meeting House. This pile will need to be sorted and stacked under the museum ramp in the next few days for use in starting the fires in our locomotives.

Tomorrow night, Tuesday, August 7, is our last Ice Cream Run of the season, and cars going should be fired up and ready to leave here not later than 6:15. As usual we will have seats for any who would like to ride along. Mike and Kathryn May expect to join us as they will be here this week for committee meetings and our quarterly Board meeting on Thursday night. I have been preparing the Model 87 for a 700-mile trip in Vermont by the Mays and the Reillys, for which they will leave on Friday, 8/10. Work sessions can take place Tuesday and Thursday nights for those not interested in ice cream or involved with the Board meeting. Best wishes to all. Tom