

Red Erwin's Personal Purgatory

Without counting the cost to himself, SSgt. Henry Erwin did what had to be done to save the B-29 crew.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

WE may marvel at the heroism and tenacity of the men whose stories have been told in this column, but few readers can truly comprehend the suffering of many Vietnam POWs, the epic struggle of Lance Sijan, or the gallantry of Jack Mathis. What they did lies beyond the realm of our experience. But most of us have borne in some small degree the kind of anguish SSgt. Henry E. Erwin endured to save the lives of his fellow crewmen. We can empathize with his suffering and perhaps more fully appreciate the depth of his heroism.

On April 12, 1945, the *City of Los Angeles*, a 29th Bombardment Group aircraft commanded by Capt. George Simeral, led a formation of Guam-based B-29s in a low-level attack on a chemical plant at Koriyama, some 120 miles north of Tokyo. It was the eleventh combat mission for Captain Simeral's lead crew. Alabama-born Henry Erwin, known to his family as "Gene" and to his squadron mates as "Red," was the B-29's radio operator. According to retired Colonel Simeral, a holder of the DSC, Erwin was "a country boy, quiet, unassuming, religiously devout," and the best radioman of the 52d Bomb Squadron.

One of Erwin's additional duties was to drop a phosphorus smoke bomb through a chute in the B-29's floor when the lead plane reached an assembly area over enemy territory. He was given the signal to drop the bomb when the *City of Los Angeles* was off the south coast of

Japan and under attack by flak ships. Erwin, bare-headed and with shirtsleeves rolled up, pulled the pin and released his bomb into the chute. The fuse malfunctioned, igniting the phosphorus, which burned at a temperature of 1,300 degrees. (The heating element of an electric range glows red at 1,100 degrees.) The canister blew back up the chute into Red Erwin's face, blinding him, searing off one ear, and filling the B-29 with heavy smoke that obscured the pilots' instrument panel.

Erwin knew that the bomb would burn through the metal floor into the bomb bay. It had to be jettisoned or the aircraft and crew were lost. Totally blind, he located the burning bomb on the floor, picked it up in his bare hands, and stumbled forward toward the flight deck, aiming to throw it out the copilot's window. As he groped his way around the gun turret, his face and arms covered with ignited phosphorus, his path was blocked by the navigator's folding table, hinged to the wall but now down and locked. The navigator had left his table to make a sighting.

Erwin needed both hands to release the table's latches. While he felt for them, he held the white-hot

bomb under his bare right arm. In those seconds, the phosphorus burned through his flesh to the bone. Now a walking torch, Red Erwin staggered on into the cockpit, threw the bomb out the window, and collapsed between the pilots' seats.

Captain Simeral, no longer blinded by smoke, pulled the B-29 out of a dive at 300 feet above the water and turned toward Iwo Jima where Sergeant Erwin could be given emergency treatment. Horrified crew members extinguished the flames consuming Erwin's clothing and administered first aid. Whenever the sergeant's burns were uncovered, phosphorus embedded in his flesh began to smoulder. In terrible pain, Erwin remained conscious throughout the flight to Iwo. He spoke only to inquire about the safety of the crew.

The medics at Iwo did not believe Erwin could survive. Cutting through red tape, AAF officials, spurred by Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay and Brig. Gen. Lauris Norstad, approved award of the Medal of Honor in a matter of hours, so a presentation could be made while Erwin lived. A Medal was flown to Guam and presented in the hospital there.

Contrary to the flight surgeons' opinion, Sergeant Erwin did survive. He was evacuated to the States, and after thirty months and reconstructive surgery that restored his eyesight and the use of one arm, Red Erwin was given a disability discharge from the AAF as a master sergeant in October 1947. For thirty-seven years he served as a Veterans' Benefit Counselor at the VA Hospital in Birmingham.

While Sergeant Erwin lay swathed in bandages in the hospital at Guam, Gen. Hap Arnold wrote: "I regard your act as one of the bravest in the records of this war." No one could argue with that judgment. Red Erwin was, and always will remain, a hero among heroes. ■



Sergeant Erwin bore unbelievable pain to save his crewmates.