

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

Men Against the Sea

The B-29 crew bailed out over the Bay of Bengal, where no air-sea rescue submarines were on station. Raw courage and a stroke of luck brought most of them through.

THE B-29 Superfortress was developed primarily for long-range strategic bombing of Japan. Until the Mariana Islands could be retaken, the B-29s were based in India, and strikes against Japan were staged through bases in eastern China. One of the early groups based in India, at Chakulia to the west of Calcutta, was the 40th Bomb Group. It participated in the first strategic strike—against steel plants at Yawata, Japan—on June 15, 1944.

The big bombers also were used frequently against tactical targets in Southeast Asia. On February 26, 1945, one of the 40th's crews was assigned an unescorted photoreconnaissance mission to Singapore, about 1,800 miles away from home base. No survivor of Capt. James Lyons's crew will ever forget that day.

On their flight home from a thus-far uneventful sortie, their B-29 was attacked by an enemy fighter. Co-pilot Mills Bale, who was at the controls, turned into the bandit, and central fire control gunner Pfc. J. M. Moffit fired continuously but with no results. The CFC system clearly was out of sync. Bad news, because much of the flight home would be in range of enemy fighters.

Shells from the Japanese plane set the nose section afire, seriously wounded bombardier 1st Lt. William Kintis, and knocked out the number two engine. While radio operator Sgt. Joseph Dimock helped extinguish the flames, Captain Lyons pulled the unconscious Kintis out of the flames, burning his hands so badly that when he later removed them from the controls, the skin remained on the wheel.

The enemy fighter struck again, hitting a full auxiliary fuel tank in the

rear bomb bay. When the damaged tank was jettisoned, it hit the bomb bay doors and became lodged partially out of the aircraft. Radar operator TSgt. John Topolski and left gunner TSgt. Louis Sandrick went into the open bomb bay with no parachutes and managed to release the tank, but it hit and bent the bomb bay doors so badly they would not close. If it became necessary to abandon the aircraft, ditching was out. They would have to parachute into the water, with a reduced chance of rescue.

Despite the bomber's damaged condition, Captain Lyons thought the B-29 would get them home. They were losing altitude slowly when he noticed a small spot on the leading edge of the wing near the feathered number two engine. The spot gradually expanded. It was a fire in the wing. An hour later, Sandrick, who had been watching the wing, heard an explosion and saw the upper skin of the wing flex. Captain Lyons knew it was time to get out. Their approximate location was reported by another B-29 that was following them, air-sea rescue forces were notified, and, soon after the crew bailed out, a search got under way.

A line had been attached to the rip cord of Bill Kintis's parachute, and the still-unconscious bombardier was dropped out, followed as rapidly as possible by other crew members. Kintis was never seen again, nor were the tailgunner Sgt. J. J. Carney or CFC gunner Moffit. The B-29 exploded while the crew members were still descending in their chutes.

The sea was relatively calm, but swells made it impossible for the men to see each other. By shouting, Lyons, Bale, SSgt. Anthony P. Peleckis, flight engineer Lt. Frank Thorp, and Sandrick found each other in the next few hours and tied themselves together to ride out a long night with an uncertain outcome. The next day, about twenty hours after they bailed out, the five were rescued by an RAF Catalina flying boat.

Soon after the crew had punched out, a 40th Bomb Group B-29 located some of the other men and dropped a raft, which Sergeant Dimock retrieved. Paddling toward their shouts, he picked up navigator Lt. Nathan Teplick and Vernon Lester, but Sergeant Topolski had become separated from the others. His Mae West could barely keep him afloat. Half swimming and half floating, he spent a lonely, terrifying night in the shark-infested water.

By great good fortune, the British submarine HMS *Seadog*, which was patrolling for enemy shipping, picked up the signal of the B-29 that had been following Lyons's Superfortress and had reported the location of the crew's bailout. The submarine's captain, Lt. E. A. Hobson, abandoned his antishipping mission and navigated toward the coordinates of the B-29's signal, despite the danger of attack by Japanese surface ships.

At midafternoon the next day, *Seadog* spotted the raft bearing Dimock, Teplick, and Lester. The three persuaded Lieutenant Hobson to continue a hazardous search for other members of their crew. The submarine finally found an exhausted Topolski, who had been in the water for nearly thirty hours and would not have lasted another night. The four men were transferred to an RAF Catalina and flown to Calcutta. It was the same flying boat that had picked up Lyons and those with him, then returned to continue the search.

After recuperating in the hospital, the nine survivors rejoined their group at Tinian, its new base. The 40th BG continued to fly missions against Japan, earning two Distinguished Unit Citations in addition to the one it had been awarded for its part in the initial attack on Yawata. But they never flew another mission quite comparable to their return from Singapore. ■

Thanks to William A. Rooney, a former member of the 40th BG and editor of the 40th Bomb Group's newsletter, "Memories."