



The Longest Mission

The crew of the B-29 *Double Trouble* had some odd moments on a flight fraught with dangers.

By Charles A. Jones

■ June 1945, Japanese wartime propaganda broadcasts announced that a lone USAAF B-29 bomber had been shot down over Hokkaido, the northernmost of Japan's main islands. The claims surprised the crew aboard the B-29 *Double Trouble*, which was the lone Superfortress on that particular mission.

Double Trouble had safely returned to its base on Guam after flying what is believed to be the longest nonstop combat mission of World War II. The photoreconnaissance mission, flown over the two-day period of June 25-26,

covered a staggering 4,650 miles and took 23 hours to complete.

This flight was mission No. 15 for a crew that would eventually be credited with 29 combat sorties. Mission 15 was to conduct radar photographic reconnaissance over various cities in northern Japan.

Double Trouble was manned by Crew P-10 in the 39th Bomb Group, 314th Bomb Wing, XXI Bomber Command. Her officers were all lieutenants: aircraft commander 1st Lt. Thomas A. Bell, pilot 2nd Lt. Richard D. Harrison, navigator 2nd Lt. Joseph F. Cal-

laghan, bombardier 1st Lt. Richard D. Baldrige Jr., and radar observer and instrument specialist 2nd Lt. Elmer C. Jones, the author's father. The enlisted crew comprised flight engineer MSgt. George W. Beaver Jr., radio operator SSgt. David Schulman, central fire controller gunner TSgt. John J. Essig, left gunner SSgt. David E. Potters, right gunner SSgt. Ralph W. Johnson, and tail gunner Sgt. Thomas F. Smith Jr.

Diaries were forbidden for security reasons, but tail gunner Smith kept one with two entries concerning the mission. Under a list headed "Important



Photo via Charles Jones

Double Trouble and crew, ready to deploy.

Dates” is, “15th Mission: 6-26-45 Hokkaido! 23 1/2 hrs.”

Smith’s diary indicates that the crew briefed at 2:30 p.m. and departed at 5:05 p.m., flying up “without a hitch—fine weather.”

In light of the ban on diaries, Jones was more discreet, and documented his missions in small handwritten charts on the blank pages of his “G.I.” New Testament. The longest mission was listed as “Radar Photo.”

Jones’ “Mickey Operator’s Flimsy,” which also gave details of the mission, also survives.

For security purposes, the radar and the radar observer were both called “Mickey” (after Mickey Mouse) to conceal from the Japanese the B-29’s capability to bomb by radar, especially at night. Mickey sat just ahead of the tail gunner, but had no window at his station. This confined environment later led Jones to comment, “I was in the war, but I didn’t see the war.”

The “flimsy” was a document prepared for Mickey for each mission. It listed the targets on Hokkaido—the cities of Muroran, Sapporo, and Otaru—and also provided directions and Identification Friend or Foe (IFF) system data. Jones, as Mickey, also had some responsibility for the IFF, to prevent attack by friendly forces.

Lights On

Smith wrote that the crew “got some damned good pictures” but that the camera “screwed up” after the second run. He noted that “Lt. Jones used hand camera—but results aren’t assured.”

P-10 encountered no enemy opposition over Hokkaido, and in fact

was inadvertently welcomed by the Japanese when they flew over the airfield at Sapporo that night.

“The unsuspecting Japanese turned on their landing strip lights as the plane circled their field in preparation for another run on [a] target,” reported *The Blockbuster*, the 39th Bomb Group’s newsletter in Guam, adding that this relieved “the monotony of the trip.”

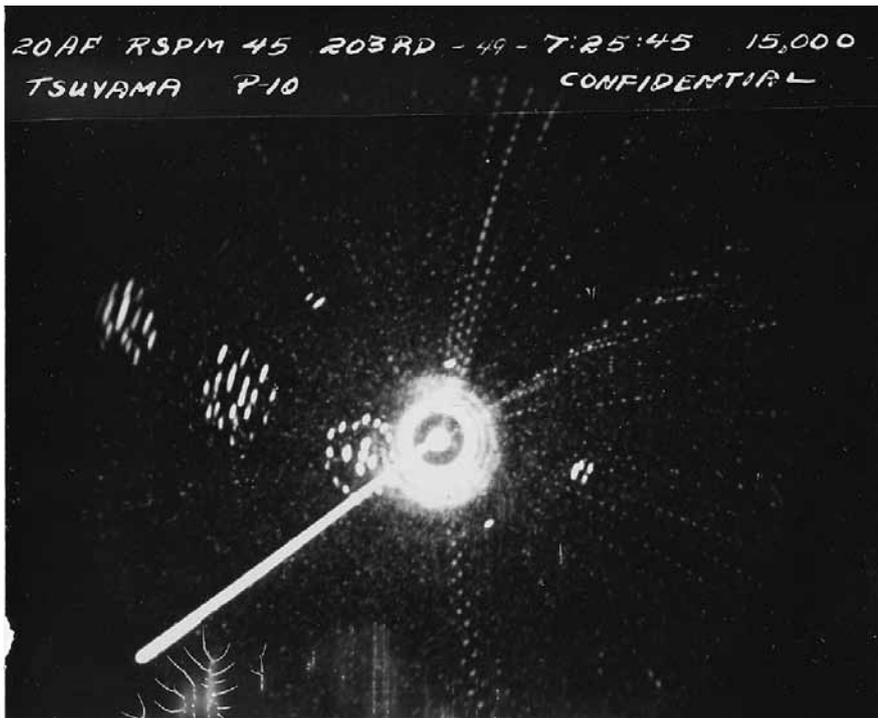
Jones, who did not see Sapporo’s lights since he was monitoring the radar screen, heard the announcement over the airplane’s intercom that the Sapporo airfield had turned on its landing lights. He suspects that the Japanese—never contemplating B-29 flights so far north over Japan—thought that *Double Trouble* was a Japanese aircraft preparing to land, and thus turned on the landing lights to aid its arrival.

The Sapporo incident provided comic relief for a mission fraught with numerous potential dangers.

As with any mission, *Double Trouble* could have crashed anywhere, anytime. Takeoff and landing mishaps, fighters, anti-aircraft fire, weather,



B-29s line the ramp at North Field, Guam. Double Trouble flew from Guam to Hokkaido, Japan, and back in what was likely World War II’s longest nonstop combat mission.



This sample radar reconnaissance photo, also taken by Crew P-10, shows ships of the US Third Fleet near Japan.

and mechanical malfunctions—all posed hazards.

Parachuting over water or ditching were other dangers, given the size of the Pacific and the risk involved in hitting the water.

Smith's diary, for instance, noted how the bomb group's Crew 13 had been forced to bail out on a regular formation mission with Col. George W. Mundy, the group commander, aboard. "All got out OK," Smith wrote, but this was partly because "Crew 5 escorted them to a sub." When formations flew missions, ships and subs often lined the flight route to retrieve aviators who ditched or parachuted.

P-10 was on a single-ship mission, would have no such assistance, and as Jones described flying over the Pacific, "Boy, that's a huge place."

The emergency or alternate landing site was in Vladivostok in the USSR. "Fortunately we did not have to go there," said Jones, even before word leaked out in the media that the Soviet Union was detaining American servicemen who diverted to Vladivostok. "Of course, we didn't want to go there because if you got interned there, you never got out."

If the crew had to ditch or parachute over the water, it would be without ship or submarine "lifeguards." Jones put it succinctly: "We were on our own."

With no aerial refueling, P-10 had to be self-sufficient. Jones estimated

that *Double Trouble* had approximately 8,000 gallons of fuel, including three extra tanks in the bomb bay.

While the old saying about safety in numbers was true for formation flying, flying alone paradoxically also provided a measure of safety for the single-ship missions.

Half a Pint of Fuel

"The Japs, while a strange lot by Western standards, are not dumb," stated an account in the language of the day in *Brief*, an official wartime publication of the United States Army Strategic Air Forces. The article explained that single B-29s were conducting photographic reconnaissance missions over Japan to obtain photographs that formations of B-29s could later use when bombing Japan.

The Japanese knew exactly why a single B-29 was overhead. They knew what it was doing, tracked its path, and submitted detailed reports. They also knew that formations of attacking bombers would eventually follow.

Lone bombers therefore benefited from a degree of protection and were not sitting ducks. Not only did the Japanese defenders want to track the aircraft's path, but the Japanese typically did not fire at single aircraft because doing so would reveal their anti-aircraft gun positions.

Two other dangers were fatigue and fuel consumption. Smith felt the

fatigue even while he "enjoyed" the ride. Jones commented on getting "so tired that you can't hardly sleep."

To conserve fuel, the crew flew at "Dear John" speed—197 mph, Smith wrote.

"Dear John" was of course the term for a letter to a service member, ending a romantic relationship. Jones later speculated that Smith, after considering P-10's situation (single ship) and slow speed, knew that if anything went wrong, the mission would end adversely—just as a Dear John letter ended a relationship. "You get a 'Dear John' letter," Jones explained, "and it's all over."

According to the tail gunner's diary, *Double Trouble* eventually landed with just a half-pint of fuel remaining.

The crew was "tired as dogs" by the time it came in at 4:30 p.m. the following day, wrote Smith, but had "a field day over Hokkaido!" At times it "was bright as hell when we were over Jap territory."

"Cities, towns, industrial targets, steel plants," airfields, all were lit up "like Christmas," wrote Smith, who clearly enjoyed the mission. "Circled an airfield as tho [sic] we were back in Kansas! Fun? I never enjoyed myself more. Not one burst of flak—one searchlight, but it went right out. Navigation lights on coast all on! No blackout. Damn fools we are for even going near the place! Made two runs on one city—big as life!"

Double Trouble returned safely, notwithstanding the Japanese announcement that the "lone B-29" had been shot down over Hokkaido.

The crew had "volunteered" for the mission, although Bell, the pilot and aircraft commander, may have volunteered without bothering to consult the other crewmen in the process. P-10 also had a good radar (the AN/APQ-13), which allowed Jones to obtain excellent radar photographs.

The set was not without its problems, however. It was complicated, difficult to operate, and essentially impossible to fix if broken. "I couldn't repair it even if it was on the ground," said Jones.

Radar bombing results from early 1945 were not coming back as effective as expected, so an expert from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was flown to the Pacific to examine the problem. He flew thousands of miles to Guam, and flew with the bomb group on some missions, but was ultimately

only able to offer a simple “fix” to the radar accuracy problem. He told the radar operators to decrease the “gain” on their radar scopes, thus dimming the target image.

For security reasons, the mission was kept secret until after the Japanese agreed to surrender terms in August 1945.

“It has now been revealed that the B-29 *City of Maywood* [another name for *Double Trouble*] made the longest flight on record,” reported an A2 (intelligence) news summary from XXI Bomber Command on Aug. 23, 1945. The B-29 “flew from Guam to Hokkaido and returned, a distance of 4,650 miles, in a few minutes under 23 hours.”

Four members of Crew P-10 received Distinguished Flying Crosses through General Orders No. 44 of Aug. 25, 1945 for the mission. They were: aircraft commander Bell, navigator Callaghan, flight engineer Beaver, and radar observer Jones.

The DFC citation chronicles the flight, stating that the crew volunteered for “a highly successful reconnaissance mission,” in what it described as “one of the longest combat flights in history.” (Other sources, however, state that it was the longest combat flight in history up to that time.)

“A camera malfunction required that a part of the route be retraced so that pictures could be taken with hand cameras,” read the DFC citation. “In spite of these obstacles, however, photographs of superior quality and great usefulness were obtained. Throughout this exceptionally long flight, there were constantly present with the lone B-29 dangers from hostile fighters and anti-aircraft defenses, weather, and mechanical malfunctions.”

The story of the mission was front-page news for the Sept. 1, 1945 edition of *The Blockbuster*.

It reported that “censorship forbade earlier coverage of this historic nonstop flight, but the honor for it is purely local.” *The Blockbuster* reported that *Double Trouble*'s crew spent three hours, 10 minutes flying over Hokkaido.

A *Stars and Stripes* article noted that the flight distance of 4,650 miles is the same as between New York City and Moscow.

The DFC citation mentioned the actions of three of the recipients specifically. Callaghan was cited for navigation skill that enabled the flight to be flown “exactly as briefed”; Beaver for his management of the



The members of *Double Trouble*'s air and ground crews on Guam. Radar operator Elmer Jones is standing at far left; aircraft commander Thomas Bell stands third from left; and tail gunner Thomas Smith is kneeling at far left.

fuel supply, which had been “closely calculated”; and Jones for obtaining important and much needed reconnaissance photographs.

Long before the lights came on at Sapporo for *Double Trouble*, each of her crew members was highly trained and then assembled to comprise Crew P-10.

The Role of Luck

Although Jones had been drafted into the Army, he wanted no part of ground combat after seeing the movie “All Quiet on the Western Front.” He therefore applied for and was accepted into the aviation cadet program, and was later assigned to navigation training.

Each officer, upon commissioning as a second lieutenant, was assigned to a specific corps or branch within the Army. After graduating from navigation school, Jones was appointed a second lieutenant in the Air Corps of the Army of the United States. He had the military occupational specialty of navigator, and later attained the radar observer MOS.

By way of complex training and certification programs such as this, each airman found himself assigned to Crew P-10.

After the 23-hour mission, two more months and 14 missions passed before

the crew learned about Japan’s August acceptance of surrender terms. They got the news while returning from their 29th and last combat mission.

Under “Important Dates” in Smith’s diary is the note, “Japs Give Up!!!”

The crew’s 30th and last mission was over the battleship *Missouri*, after the surrender ceremonies in Tokyo Bay.

Jones attributes P-10’s survival during 29 long and dangerous combat sorties to Bell’s piloting skills and to the Japanese policy of not shooting at single aircraft. Approximately half of P-10’s missions were single-ship flights.

Jones, as an expert poker player, also acknowledged the role of luck in the “deadly game” of war. “If you won, you were OK,” he later said. “If you lost, you were dead.”

Crew P-10 never assembled for a reunion, and time took its toll. As central fire controller Essig wrote in 2000, “Old P-10 crew is getting smaller every year.”

Today, Jones is P-10’s only survivor—even the aircraft is no more.

Double Trouble was scrapped in 1954, just months before the author was born. A memorandum from the Air Force Museum, responding to an inquiry about its status stated, “Sorry to have to tell you she doesn’t exist anymore.” ■

Charles A. Jones retired from the Marine Corps Reserve as a colonel in 2009, after serving a combination of 28 years on active duty and as a reservist. This is his first article for Air Force Magazine.