

MISSION: BURN JAPAN!

DURING WORLD WAR TWO, MANY MILITARY PLANNERS ADVOCATED THE THEORY THAT THE WAR COULD BE WON BY AIRPOWER ALONE. HOWEVER, THIS THEORY REMAINED UNPROVEN UNTIL GENERALS HAP ARNOLD AND CURTIS LEMAY UNLEASHED THE

MIGHT OF THE BOEING B-29 SUPERFORTRESS ON THE JAPANESE HOME ISLANDS

PART TWO

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B-29 PROFILES COURTESY MARK STYLING / OSPREY PUBLISHING

The USAAF and “Hap” Arnold finally gave up on Chinese bases when Chiang Kai-shek demanded \$100 million for them. The sum, if paid, would have proven a financial coup to the Chinese leader, since he was paying his laborers 20 cents per day for building them. The rivalry among Stillwell, Nimitz, MacArthur, Mountbatten, and others to determine where and how the B-29s were to be used soon proved so contentious that Gen. Arnold almost asked the president for a field command, stating he no longer wanted to argue with the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Alarmed, Gen. George Marshall, who was the head of the Joint Chiefs, allowed Arnold to run 20th and later 21st Air Command from the Pentagon, giving him full control.

In July, a successful raid by 96 B-29s flying from Chengtu, in Manchuria, boosted morale. Eighty of the bombers reached the target and bombed. Nevertheless, the China bases were vulnerable and the next significant raid took off from British Ceylon against Sumatran oil refineries. The mission would require a 4000-mi round trip and

crews were briefed that British warships would patrol the last 600-mi of the return route in order to pick up those who ran out of fuel and could not finish the round trip. Forty-two B-29s attacked the refinery from altitude, while twelve came in low. During the attack one of the B-29s lost an engine, but the pilot was able to bring his bomber back to Ceylon on three engines, covering a distance of 4030-mi in a grueling 19-hrs. During the return flight, he discovered that with its bomb load gone the B-29 could cruise better and longer on three engines, than it could on four.

Despite a rash of problem delays connected with all new aircraft, the B-29 was coming into its own. Gradually its



B-29s pass by Mt. Fuji with impunity. (Boardman C. Reed)

crews were working out the bugs. Production fixes were being implemented and in July 1944, Gen. Wolfe was

recalled to Washington. An engineer and as familiar with the B-29 as any officer in the USAAF, Wolfe had no previous combat command experience. His replacement, Gen. Curtis LeMay, had plenty and, as soon as he arrived in China, he laid down the law. His first order to his officers was to tell American ground commanders, Gen. Chennault, the Chinese and the British, “to go to hell,” when they asked for air support for their pet schemes. LeMay had other things on his mind. He was going to implement Arnold’s plan of reducing Japanese resistance “by bombing alone.”

In addition to a host of lesser organizations, air operations in China, Burma, and India were run primarily by 14th Air Force.

LeMay, in charge of 20th Bombing Command, wanted no part of its intrigues. He also kept his distance from China Air Transport (CAT) which, along with several other lesser outfits, ferried material into China. Under strict orders from Arnold, LeMay was to jealously guard 20th Bombing Command’s resources. It

was to marshal its forces for one thing and one thing only: Air strikes on Japan, and was not to fritter away its strength to please Chennault or America’s British and Chinese allies.

When LeMay was told in no uncertain terms by Arnold that he could not go along on any of the B-29 missions, he was furious. After much argument he convinced his chief that a commander could not get a feel for his mission, if he was restricted to his desk. Arnold relented and allowed LeMay one mission. After a few weeks in China, LeMay chose one to Anshan, Manchuria, primarily because it was a tough target and he had intelligence that the best Japanese fighter pilots were defending the steel-making complex.

During the mission, LeMay carefully studied the tactics utilized by enemy interceptor pilots and later dismissed them as “stinkin!” According to the general they had come in on the B-29s in perfect position to make, “a beautiful attack on us, but had turned the wrong way.” By the time they turned, they could never catch up with the

One can imagine the tension level in both the aircraft and on the Japanese Home Islands as a raid of low-level Superfortresses prepare to cross the enemy’s coast. (Boardman C. Reed)