

[V-Square 25]

The Tale of Two B-29s

by Ray Brashear, Col. USAF (Ret.)

The enclosed photos could well be entitled "The Two B-29s." The original V-square 25, s/n 4674, was picked up by our crew at the Boeing plant in Wichita, Kan., on 13 October 1944 and flown to the staging base at Herrington, Kan. We shook the airplane down very thoroughly on the ground but were only allowed one test flight. Since our navigator, Lt. Edwin Bartenstein, and I agreed that there was a lot of water between San Francisco and Saipan, we spent much of the flight calibrating airspeed indicators, the various compasses and other navigation equipment. We didn't actually test fire the guns but the turrets, remote sights, and computers ground checked perfectly. It was a brand-new, beautiful airplane compared to the early B-29s we flew infrequently while in training at Salina, Kan.

Our departure date from Herrington was November 5th and we landed at Mather Field, Calif., seven hours later. The next three days, we attended route briefings but bad weather in Hawaii delayed our departure. However, on the day we took off, we were assured our nighttime arrival in Honolulu would be in good weather. It was, until an hour out of Honolulu where solid clouds were encountered. When finally we were able to contact John Rogers tower, we were informed that we would have to make an instrument approach in heavy rain. We were also asked if our "cockrel was crowing." There were blank stares all around, but we assumed they were referring to that mysterious device called IFF. The red cover for the IFF switch was checked and found to be closed and safety wired in place. They were advised that our cockrel was certainly not crowing. The next day I was told that the red cover was indeed safety wired in the closed

position, but the switch underneath was in the on position. We had been "crowing" all the way from Kansas.

Our letdown was somewhat less than precise. However, we broke out of the clouds at 800 feet approximately where we should be, still in heavy rain. The letdown heading was at least 60 degrees from the runway heading and a right turn was required to line up on the runway. The tower operator advised that the first runway lights we would see would be a large seaplane runway offshore and that we should continue our heading until the John Rogers runway was in sight. Now forward visibility in a B-29 in heavy rain left much to be desired. When the copilot, bombardier and I eventually saw some blurry runway lights off to our right. I started to roll out on them. A quick admonishment from the tower corrected our error, and a few moments later the much, much smaller runway came into view.

After a two-day layover in Honolulu, we were off for Kwajalein and then Saipan. The trip was smooth and uneventful with one small exception. We picked up a war correspondent in Honolulu who was on his way to Saipan. He had a book with him entitled

Forever Amber, which was quite risque for its day. He alternately read and slept and handed the book to me when he was tired of reading. I skimmed through a few pages before glancing out the left window to check on our engines. Lo and behold, a *Corsair* F4U was sitting right off our left wingtip. He could have been there for 10 or 15 minutes. I must have given the pilot a rather startled look as he just shook his head slowly a few times. We looked at each other for a while, then he gave a small wave, peeled off to the left and disappeared. This, out in the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean! From then on I made certain that all crew members on duty as scanners did some scanning, including myself. Ed's calibration exercise back at Herrington, Kan., paid off, because we hit all of our destinations right on the button.

Living conditions on Saipan were quite primitive when we arrived but continued to improve rapidly. Several times we were briefed for our first big raid on Tokyo, but each time the mission was scrubbed because of bad weather over Japan. In the meantime we were subjected to some unnerving nighttime air raids by the Japanese. Not much damage was done during these raids, but they made all of us new arrivals realize we were in a combat zone.

Finally, on 24 November 1944 the first bombing mission was off for Japan, flying 1,500 miles in formation

View of the first V-square 25, s/n 4675, photographed by the author on Saipan before being damaged during a Japanese air raid in mid-December 1944.



all the way to Tokyo. My crew chief pleaded to go along, and I finally agreed, much against regulations and my better judgment. As it turned out, it was fortunate that he was along. After nearly 30 minutes in formation, the rear bomb doors suddenly popped open. The bombardier immediately put the rear bomb door switch to the "open" position which ran the jack screws out to the open doors. This re-latched them and he closed the doors. While this was taking place I had to add considerable power to stay in formation. Shortly thereafter, the rear doors popped open again and the retraction procedure was repeated, including my addition of power. This happened several more times until the bomb door motor finally burned out.

Without going into too much detail, I'll try to explain how our flight engineer and crew chief overcame a sure abort. A toggle switch to the left rear of the pilot's seat transferred electrical power to an emergency buss system that had several outlets in the bomb bays. Also, in the rear bomb bay was a spare electric motor that could be plugged into these outlets. A spade grip and a forward and reverse toggle switch was mounted on one end of the motor while a drive coupling and an attachment plate was on the shaft end. This motor could be used in five locations: one for each landing gear, one for the flaps and one for each set of bomb doors.

Upon entering the rear bomb bay, Lt. Parsons and T/Sgt. Ropelis discovered that the salvo cable for the doors was too short. At maximum gross weight and in turbulence, the fuselage apparently flexed just enough for the cable to release the doors. They disconnected the cable, attached the portable motor to the bomb door drive and closed the doors. As soon as this happened, I deactivated the emergency buss. This coordination was possible because of an intercom system in the bomb bay. They then placed the toggle switch to the "open" position and tied a length of shroud line from an emergency drop kit parachute to the switch, ran it over the pressurized tunnel and tied the other end onto the lug of one



Replacement B-29 V-square 25, s/n 4758, was also damaged by a noontime Japanese air raid and followed the first to an unknown fate.

(Photo by Ray Brashear)

of the top bombs. When the target was reached, I activated the emergency buss just long enough for the doors to open. After bombs away, all fingers were crossed as I again hit the emergency buss, hoping that the shroud line had flipped the switch to the "close" position. Sure enough the doors closed. I wanted to put Lt. Parsons and T/Sgt. Ropelis in for a citation, but since Sgt. Ropelis shouldn't have been aboard, I got cold feet.

We were only able to fly 4674 on one more mission, as it was damaged during a Japanese air raid in mid-December 1944. Although deemed flyable, it was not combat capable. At that time, Saipan did not have the heavy equip-

ment required to repair 4674, so we were directed to fly it to the depot at Harmon Field, Guam. There it was discovered that the damage was far more severe than first thought. Since it would be undergoing repairs for several weeks, we caught a shuttle flight back to Saipan. Shortly thereafter, our crew was "issued" another V-square 25, s/n 4758. We completed five missions in this aircraft before it, too, was damaged during a noontime Japanese air raid.

What happened to the two V-square 25s I don't know, but I assume they were repaired and returned to different organizations wearing different group and squadron markings. Our crew finished the required 35 missions flying a number of different aircraft: V-21, V-3, V-34, V-37 and V-28. There never was a third V-square 25 to my knowledge.