

The “City of Phoenix”

The story of the last B-29 shot down over Tokyo, Japan.

The summer of 1945 was not a good time for the Japanese war effort. The majority of the merchant fleet was now resting on the bottom of the ocean. In fact, American submarine commanders were complaining that they were having a hard time finding a target worthy of a torpedo. Metal shortages were bad enough that the Japanese were now making ceramic hand grenades and rifles were being built with wood butt plates. Along with material shortages a lack of petroleum products had made mounting an effective defense almost an impossibility. In April the super battleship Yamato had sortied to Okinawa with only enough fuel for a one way trip.

In addition to the lack of strategic war materials caused by the loss of the merchant fleet, American bombing had left industries and city's in ruin. Starting in late 1944 American B-29 bombers operating out of the Mariana Islands had wrecked havoc on the empire. In March, 279 bombers managed to destroy almost 16 square miles and kill an estimated 100,000 people in Tokyo one evening. As a result of the bombing campaign Japan had inter dispersed its small industry among population centers thus making almost everything in Japan a viable target. As if traditional bombing wasn't enough on the morning of August 6th 1945 the city of Hiroshima was the recipient of the first Atomic Bomb used in combat.

Despite this the Japanese showed no signs of surrender. They continued to sacrifice their young men on one way journeys to death. With the impending invasion of the mainland it was expected that all would fight to the end. With this in mind the Army Air Force decided to continue their air war against the empire. Thus on August 8th three combat missions were flown against the empire. 100's of bombers would depart on these raids from Guam, Saipan, and Tinian islands. It is on the Island of Guam at North Field that our story begins.

The City of Phoenix, officially known as SN 44-87664 was operated by the 6th Bomb Squadron, 29th Bomb group based on Guam. She was your typical B-29. A product of the most expensive weapons program of WW2 the aircraft had a price tag of just under \$700,000 (that is just over 10 million in today's money). The B-29 developed by Boeing was a massive technological advance in aviation. Powered by four 2200 horse power, 18 cylinder supercharged Wright engines she could cruise at over 30,000 feet at 220 mph. Her crew were kept comfortable in pressurized compartments, gun turrets were now operated remotely. Radar allowed bombing a target without seeing the ground. Despite

early teething issues, the B-29 proved to be a remarkable and capable heavy bomber.

The City of Phoenix had an experienced, well seasoned crew. The aircraft commander was Captain James Shumate. Prior to the war James had worked for American Airlines as a mechanic at Sky Harbor airfield in Phoenix. While there he would marry the love of his life Fanny Jean Cooke in June of 1941. Together they would have one child, a daughter Kathryn. He enlisted in the army air corps less than two weeks after Pearl Harbor and went through the typical gambit of flight training. He ended up being selected as an aircraft commander and finally headed to combat in 1944. He and his crew were good enough at their craft that after 14 missions in their aircraft "Thunderbird", they were sent back to the states and trained as a lead crew. This training would allow them to lead their group into combat, a great responsibility that came with even greater risks. To say that the entire crew were the best of the best would not be an understatement.

The night before the mission preparations were well under way. A small army of mechanics under the watchful eye of the crew chief remedied any issues the bomber had. Engines were gone over with a fine tooth comb. The electrical, hydraulic, and various other systems were thoroughly checked and any faults corrected. Tanks were filled with thousands of gallons of high octane gasoline and hundreds of gallons of oil for the 13 hour round trip flight. High explosive bombs and belts of .50 caliber machine gun ammunition were loaded. This scene was played out at each of the hundreds of aircraft that would take part in the next days mission.

Today's mission would be number 20 for Captain Shumate and his crew. The morning started out with the mission briefing. First the group commander would address the men. Then intelligence, weather and other officers would follow with specific details. Today's mission was target 357, the Nakajima aircraft engine factory outside of Tokyo. This was a very heavily defended target and had been bombed numerous times before. The crew left the briefing knowing this would not be an easy mission. Of course talk of the atomic strike on Hiroshima would have also been a topic of discussion. The crew must have been wondering how much more could the Japanese endure before they finally surrendered.

Shortly after 9 am the engines were started. Slowly, one at a time the giant radial engines were awakened from their slumber. Radios and instruments were adjusted and set. A chorus of checklists are read aloud as dozens of items are checked and readied. Slowly the 65 ton bomber pulls out onto a taxiway and makes her way to one of north field's runways. At 9:33 Guam time the throttles are pushed forward and the city of Phoenix thunders down the runway. At approximately 130 mph the nose wheel slowly lifts off the runway. After a

positive rate of climb is established the gear is retracted, power reduced to climb and the bomber swings slowly around to the north west, pointed for the heart of the empire.

After six hours of uneventful overwater flight the city of Phoenix is nearing the Japanese homeland. Despite all of the setbacks the enemy has suffered they can still mount a formidable defense. Not only will the crew face Anti Aircraft fire and fighters but many Japanese pilots are now willing to sacrifice themselves by ramming a bomber. As the bomber approaches the target area it reaches the initial point. From the IP to bomb release no evasive action can be taken. It is imperative that the bomber be kept steady to ensure the bombs drop with accuracy. At 20,500 feet and 30 seconds from bomb release Japanese anti aircraft fire found its mark.

It would be the last time Japanese ground defenses would shoot down a B-29 during the war.

Despite Shumate fighting the controls, the crippled bomber immediately rolled on her back and began the final plunge to earth. Only two of the crew, flight engineer MSGT Lester Morris and radio operator SSGT Serafino Morone, are able to get free from the inverted burning plane. Shumate and the rest of the crew are unable to bail out and do not survive the crash. In addition to the regular crew on this mission they carried an observer Major Bob Anthony, who also perished.

Upon landing in their parachutes near the village of Tachikawa the two survivors were surrounded by angry mobs of civilians. These people wanted blood for the relentless bombing they had endured for the last year. The Japanese military police told the civilians if they would back down and let them interrogate the prisoners, they would give them one to beat the following day. That night Morris and Morone were interrogated by the Japanese. As they were being questioned by the Japanese that evening the Soviet Union was declaring war on Japan. The morning of the 9th of August would see the Japanese city of Nagasaki hit by the second, and last atomic bomb dropped during the war. Yet despite these two overwhelming blows to their country the Japanese military police made good on their promise.

Midday on the 9th a blindfolded SSGT Morone from Pennsylvania was taken to a local school and tied to a pole. 100's of Japanese civilians descended on him with fists, feet and bamboo sticks. According to witnesses, he never cried out during the hours long beating and only asked for water once. After being beaten unconscious he was taken to a local shrine and beheaded by a Japanese officer. The Japanese claimed he died from injuries sustained in the crash in an attempt to cover up his murder. MSGT Lester "Cliff" Morris was taken to Omori POW camp and would have his severely wounded leg saved by a navy doctor who

had survived the Bataan death march. He was liberated by the marines on August 29th and taken to the navy hospital ship USS Benevolence.

Six days later the Japanese accepted the terms of unconditional surrender. The war was over.

An investigation by occupation troops uncovered the atrocity committed on SSGT Morone. The officer in charge of the local military police was tried and convicted as war criminal. The defense offered was this was allowed to happen as to "harden" the locals in anticipation of the coming invasion. His would be but one of the many atrocities dealt with after the war in military tribunals. Unfortunately, the officer who actually executed SSgt Morone would never be tried.

After the war was over the loose ends were tied up. The remains of the crew were returned to the states and buried in cemeteries from Hawaii to Arlington. Fanny Shumate came to Luke Field in the summer of 1946 for an awards ceremony where she was awarded her husband's Distinguished Flying Cross from a mission on April 15, 1945. On that mission, as a pathfinder, his aircraft had been attacked by 5 night fighters and Flak. That time, despite heavy damage, they beat the odds and made it home. Later in her life Fanny moved here to Kingman where she would live out her years. According to her caretaker Julie "she loved that man with all her heart until she died". I would like to thank her caretaker for sharing the photos and information she had saved from her time with Fanny. I would also like to thank Anthony, the grandson of TSgt Harold Brennan, for reaching out and sharing his unparalleled knowledge on this subject. Sadly, his was one of families who sacrificed so much so close to the end of the war. Today most of the people who knew these men personally have passed on. So I ask you all this week on the 75th anniversary of their loss and the end of the most horrific war in history to remember them. Please remember them all so that their loss and the loss of all of the men who paid the ultimate price for freedom is never forgotten.

Tom Saluzzo



The crew of the City of Phoenix from L to R rear row Capt. James Shumate aircraft commander. 1st LT Thomas Marshall, Pilot. 1st LT Nicholas Poulos, Navigator. 1st LT Norman Jones, Bombardier. 1st LT Henry Yasses, radar. Front row MSgt Lester Morris, Flight Engineer. SSgt Serafino Morone, Radio operator. TSgt Harold Brennan, Central Fire Control Gunner. SSgt James Payne, left gunner. SSgt Mark Miller, Right gunner. Cpl Raymond Cagle tail gunner



James Shumate at Randolph field with "N7" the T-6 trainer he soloed.



Captain James Shumate at the controls of his B-29 on Guam.



Captain James Shumate with his wife and daughter. Early summer 1945.



Fannie Shumate arrives at Luke Field, AZ to receive her husbands medals, summer 1946.