

## The Enola Gay

Since coming to the National Air and Space Museum a year ago, I have been receiving a steady stream of letters concerning the *Enola Gay*. The *Enola Gay* is the B-29 bomber that dropped the first atomic bomb, devastating Hiroshima, all but ending World War II, and changing the face of warfare for all time.

Most of the letter writers ask why the airplane is not displayed in the Museum. Some are veterans, men who risked their lives during the war. They wonder whether the Smithsonian Institution is deliberately keeping the *Enola Gay* from public view, perhaps in an attempt to rewrite history. Others urge that we refrain from exhibiting the bomber, believing that any display of the airplane could be interpreted as a tasteless flaunting of American might.

The controversial airplane became part of the Smithsonian collection nearly four decades ago. Named after the mother of Colonel Paul W. Tibbets, the pilot who flew the Hiroshima mission, the *Enola Gay* was still flyable when it went into storage at what is now Chicago-O'Hare International Airport. During the Korean War it was moved to Andrews Air Force Base near Washington, D.C. At the time, the National Air Museum, precursor of the National Air and Space Museum, had a small staff, little funding, and apparently no other means for properly caring for the airplane. Kept outdoors, the *Enola Gay* deteriorated badly.

In recent years, the bomber's fortunes have improved. It was taken apart and moved once again, to be restored at the Museum's Paul E. Garber Preservation, Restoration and Storage Facility in Suitland, Maryland, just outside Washington. Tens of thousands of visitors who have come to the Garber Facility during the past two years have been able to watch the painstaking restoration process. (Daily tours can be arranged by calling the Museum tour scheduler two to eight weeks in advance at (202) 357-1400 between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., Monday through Friday.)

Earlier plans had called for the bomber to be far more accessible. When the Museum building was conceived, there was

to be an exhibition area large enough to accommodate the *Enola Gay's* 141-foot wingspan. Limited funding, however, dictated a smaller structure. In the existing building, the bomber would just fit, but would block access to other galleries, preventing exhibit changes.

We now hope to have the airplane restored in time for display at an extension to the Museum currently planned for one of the Washington-area airports. Bills to authorize that extension have been introduced in both houses of Congress. At the new facility, other airplanes and spacecraft too massive to be brought to the Museum on the Mall would also be exhibited. One of these is the NASA shuttle *Enterprise*, now housed at Dulles International Airport, near Washington.

The *Enola Gay* will be displayed in a setting that will recall the history of strategic bombing in World War II. As distinct from tactical bombing, which was designed to destroy specific military targets, strategic bombing was meant to break an enemy's overall ability to respond militarily. It was aimed at eliminating critical resources, such as ball bearings or gasoline, thereby paralyzing the enemy, or at wreaking enough havoc to break the will of a nation. The B-29 has been called the ultimate realization of the strategic bomber in World War II.

The practice of strategic bombing has raised many questions that have been debated ever since the end of World War II. These issues are critical, because the threat of war has never entirely left us. We need to ask: How effective were the raids militarily? Did the cost to the enemy actually exceed the cost of losses to the bomber command? And, above all, how high were the losses in civilian lives?

The vocabulary of war is now different. No longer do we talk of "thousand-bomber raids" and "carpet bombing." Instead, we debate "mutually assured destruction," "nuclear winter," and "megadeaths." Otherwise little has changed.

—Martin Harwit, Director, National Air and Space Museum

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