

NEW YORK TIMES ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION,
PART IV
(1-319)

Microfilming Corporation of America
Sanford, North Carolina
1979

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No. 202

Paul Tibbets, Jr.

Aviation

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PREFACE TO THE MICROFORM

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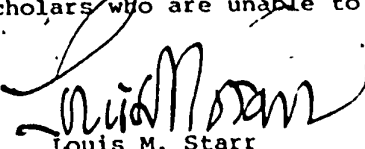
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October, 1979


Louis M. Starr
Director

The Reminiscences of

BRIGADIER GENERAL PAUL TIBBETS, JR.

Aviation Project

Oral History Research Office

Columbia University

1961

PREFACE

This manuscript is the result of a tape-recorded interview conducted by Mr. Kenneth Leish of the Oral History Research Office with Brigadier General Paul Tibbets, Jr. in Florida in December, 1960.

Only minor corrections and emendations have been made, and the reader should bear in mind, therefore, that he is reading a transcript of the spoken, rather than the written, word.

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Brigadier General Paul Tibbets, Jr. - by Kenneth Leish
Tampa, Florida - December, 1960

Q: Was it in 1938 that you first joined the Air Force?

Tibbets: No, 1937, mid-'37. I was a student at the University of Cincinnati and decided it would be a better proposition to fly than to be a doctor. So I took myself to Wright Field at Dayton, Ohio and passed a physical examination and was admitted as a flying cadet to Randolph Field and actually reported to Randolph Field in February of 1937. So I said mid-'37, but it wasn't; it was at the change of the year. I graduated one year later from; at that time, Kelly Field was the Field of graduation and I graduated and was sent to Ft. Benning, Georgia as a Second Lieutenant.

Q: Did you ever have any trouble or any incidents during your flight training?

Tibbets: Trouble or incidents? No, apparently from what I had been told by my instructors as far as the ability to fly, apparently I had average or above average ability because I had no difficulty as a student. The only impressive thing that occurred while I was there was my roommate, a boy who had gone with me from Ohio; he was from Mansfield, Ohio, a boy by the name of Frank Fish, and a big Ohio State football player. Frank and I roomed together and as we graduated from primary to basic stage the Air Force had an airplane at that particular time known

as a BT-9, which was new to the inventory and had some very undesirable type characteristics and it killed a lot of people. Well, Frank got killed almost immediately after that, and I took his body back to Ohio for burial and then returned to Randolph where the instructors mothered me very carefully to find out what kind of effect this had had on me personally. And I must say it was a real shock to have Frank killed but I recognized before I even got started in the flying game that people were going to get killed, so. As far as any emotional effect it had on me, from that point of view it had none.

Q: When did you first get into the bombing end of it? Did you want that?

Tibbets: Yes, I wanted the bombing end, and did not get into it until the War started. My reason for wanting the ~~human~~ bombing was because I had always jokingly said that the most desirable [?] tack of an airplane from my point of view would be when I would have to tell the number three co-pilot to feather number 16 engine, that the bigger they came the better I liked them. In other words, I always wanted big airplanes.

Q: And where was your bombing training?

Tibbets: Well, unfortunately, I got my bombing training in Europe. I was flying attack aviation at Savannah, Georgia when war was declared and on the Friday before they had bombed Pearl Harbor

on Sunday I had received orders assigning me to the 29th Bomb Group at MacDill and of course I never got here at that particular time because of the natural upheaval that followed Pearl Harbor, and I joined the 29th Bomb Group here at MacDill in February of '42. I ~~got~~ shoved down on anti-sub patrol on the East Coast and a bunch of things happened to me in the last of December and January and the early part of February, but I came here and was assigned to the 29th. They split the 29th in half and one part of it became known as the 97th. I was assigned to the 97th, we trained here, did advance training at Sarasota, and then started overseas and arrived in England in June of '42. So I was with the first B-17 outfit to hit England and we operated out of a place in England called Holbrook against targets and we never did get into Germany while I was there because they were going against occupied targets in Europe.

Q: Do you remember your first combat mission?

Tibbets: Well, yes, I remember it real distinctly, as a matter of fact. We were going to go, and ~~was~~ our first raid there was in France against a place called Amiens and it was a token raid. Being a rather junior type major at that particular time, I wasn't in on everything that took place, but I understand now that there was quite a controversy between the British officials and our people relative to bombing and, of course, we always said that the only way to bomb is in the daylight when you can see the target and go after a precision target and hit it, and the British said you can't live and operate under those conditions.

So, it turned out that we were an experiment. But despite that, my reaction was that I had heard people talk about wars--my father, for instance, I had heard him talk about his experiences in the First War--so I knew that problems were going to confront us as we took off and flew across that Channel. The British made a big show of it; they threw all kinds of fighters into our support. So I went across there literally expecting to get knocked down just about the minute we crossed the other shoreline, but as we arrived over there we were as strange to the Germans, I guess, as they were to us at the particular moment, and I can very well remember going on in. The artillery shells, anti-aircraft shells started to break in front of us, black puffs in the sky. We were doing what we could to avoid them by using a certain type of evasive action; in other words, we hoped that we would zig as they thought we were going to zag so that they'd shoot in the wrong place. It did; it worked out that way. And we went into the target. The fighters came up and stood off in the distance and looked at us. We watched them flying around and we figured at that time well now they're trying to size us up, and they weren't quite ready to come in and make an attack on us and they didn't until we were just on the way out after having bombed the target. It was all rather tense because of the unexpected and we were perspiring, so to speak, despite the cold weather and the heavy clothes that we had on. It was just nervousness. As we got back out across the Channel, then the fighters made their first pass at us. Actually, it was kind of a relief because based on what we believed why they'd come in and make a pass and sure as fate if they did that they were going to hit you, but of course, the net result was that their accuracy

was not too good at that particular time. Those are my vivid recollections of specifics regarding that first mission.

Q: Were you ever shot down?

Tibbets: Not shot down, shot up, meaning I've been hit and had airplanes torn up, but, no, I never had to crashland one.

Q: Could you tell me about some of the, shall I say, ^{most} harrassed moments when your plane was really badly shot up, or about some of the missions you look back on and consider most difficult or dangerous.

~~Answer~~ Tibbets: Let me tell you, nobody has been as lucky as I have in this respect. I've been hit twice in my wartime experiences of flying bombardment missions. The first time was by German fighters. We were coming back from another one of these European missions. This one was to Rotterdam and, well, we had difficulty in trying to learn the right types of tactics and the proper method to handle larger formations of airplanes and so on. And at this particular time, I was what is known as an Air Executive Officer, meaning that I was number two to the senior officer of the organization, and it was my business to lead the formations and to develop the tactics and so forth under which the outfit operated. And in this particular instance we went to Rotterdam and arrived up there with very bad weather and rather than to lead the organization I had elected to be Tailend Charlie, because Tailend Charlie was always getting shot up. The leader would turn the formation too fast or something and lose this

fellow in the turn and invariably when an airplane got separated from the main body of the formation, it was picked on by all the fighters because he had less fire power surrounding him and they would work him over. So, I said that I was going to be Tailend Charlie and try to see if there was any method that I could arrive at that would assist in making this ~~such~~ ^{such} untenable position for a fellow to fly in. So we took off and went on this thing and got over there and encountered bad weather and had a very difficult time in releasing our bombs actually. We did after ~~much~~ circling around the town, but in the meantime I don't know how many German fighters came up there, but my goodness there was a batch of them, and we had at this particular time no fighter escort either. We were on our own. But after milling around up there and finally getting these bombs away, the tendency of the leader was to push that throttle forward and start for home. And I got ~~separated~~ separated by the old usual method of being cracked like on the end of a whip ~~and~~ the way the formation went and I was there trying to catch them but with not too much ~~time~~ ^{luck}. But two wing men stayed with me and we kind of got about five miles or so behind the main body of this formation and these boys stuck real close to me and we started working our way back across the Channel. We were a three-airplane element when the fighters decided to put their attention on us. We got shot up rather badly, that is, the three airplanes. I don't know, there were four or five fellows killed in the three airplanes and my co-pilot got his hand very badly shot up. As a matter of fact, I thought he was going to lose it. I can remember quite well that when this 20 mm. cannon came right through the window and

exploded and took out the instruments on the instrument panel, hit him; another hit the top turret gunner, the ball turret gunner got killed; one of the waist gunners got wounded when the shell exploded in the cockpit. I got a few pieces of shrapnel in me, none of any real serious consequence at all. But that was the first time I was subject to any immediate damage to an airplane.

Another time, I wasn't scratched and nobody else in the airplane got a scratch. We had an 88mm. cannon come up through the wing; fortunately, it didn't have an explosive head on it; it didn't explode, it just drilled its way through there like somebody would drive a nail through a piece of wood. And there was other minor ~~damagan~~ damage to the airplane. When we got home, they found out it was cheaper to junk the airplane than it was to repair it but still we landed back.

Oh, I've had a lot more harried experiences testing airplanes than I've had flying in combat.

Q: What about on returning from a mission back to England in bad weather. Was this a common thing?

Tibbets: Well, I would say it was pretty commonplace. Now, my experiences in operating in England were between of June of '42 and November of '42, so I really didn't get the worse type of weather one can get. As a matter of fact, just here the other day I had as bad a weather as I ever encountered in England, and this was in peacetime. I mean, fog and slow drizzle and extremely poor visibility and that sort of thing. The British had this down to a pretty good science on how to handle these things, and

~~I'm not so sure that these in themselves caused a great difficulty, no.~~

Q: You were involved in the heavy bombing raids on North Africa.

Tibbets: Yes, yes. Our organization was selected to go down to North Africa from England, and I of course previous to the invasion of North Africa flew General Mark Clark down to Gibraltar where he got on the sub and went out to negotiate with the Free French ~~man~~ relative to going into North Africa and brought him back. And then I flew General Eisenhower and the staff down there on the night of the invasion and after ^{letting} General Eisenhower out, I picked up General Clark and carried him on in to Algiers to take active command of the raid. We went into Algiers--I got him in there about 4 o'clock in the afternoon--of the day when they landed, I don't know, 1 o'clock in the morning or something.

Q: When you had Eisenhower or Clark as a passenger, ~~what~~ were you ever approached by any enemy planes?

Tibbets: No, no. We were able to handle--the situation was handled in very fine shape. I didn't have anything to do with it. With General Clark we found out--the British told us in Gibraltar before we started back--that the Germans were aware that he was there and that they would try to intercept us going back up the coast to Portugal. And luck was again with us because that particular night that we went back to England with General Clark on board we had very bad weather, it was extremely bad. And we

left Gibraltar--I had a B-17 of course--and I got into this overcast with, well, in one place there would be light ice and in another place there would be heavy ice, but anyway the bad weather and the icing conditions were our protection all the way back. They wouldn't send a fighter out in that stuff; they couldn't have found us if they had. This was before fighters had radar and they didn't even have anything to direct at us as far as that was concerned. They, the Germans, situated in Portugal, couldn't direct any aircraft by radar at that time. So, all we had was just a good rough ride home, that's all.

Q: Could you tell me about one or two of the biggest missions you were on from the point of view of destruction accomplished by the type of bombs you were using then?

Tibbets: Well, you'll have to stop and remember in asking that question that at the time that I had anything to do with bombing in either England or North Africa we hadn't arrived at the point of being big yet. We were just a real small force, and the size of the bombs we used were limited to about ¹¹⁰⁰⁻~~800~~ pounders. If I'm not mistaken, I think that was the biggest thing we ever carried in a B-17. Lord, you couldn't carry very much, you know, compared to what we think about today as a bomb load. And so for big and destruction, my answer will be a disappointment, I'm sure. I was in on the first Allied or first American raid of 100 or more airplanes. That was at Lille, we bombed Lille, and our target at Lille at that particular time was a German aircraft factory. There was this factory in the area where they were building aircraft, so we went in there to bomb them and the Germans were waiting on

us. They knew we were coming, and actually, I think, it was the second operation of B-24s and they were waiting for those B-24s. They had B-24s tumbling; they didn't even look at the B-17s that trip; they were shooting those B-24s right out of the sky, right and left. It was a very difficult time for them. That raid was 100 airplanes and we hit our target. I don't remember the specifics ~~announcements~~ today, but we did hit it and we did a fair amount of damage to it, but as far as mass destruction, there was nothing there.

Going after the sub pens at St. Lazare, we used 1100 pounders and the 1100 pounders with steel cases we had on them then ~~announcements~~ bounced off of those sub pens like you'd bennet a marble off a piece of concrete. So I did nothing of any, that had ~~announcements~~ ~~announcements~~ attached to it, let's put it that way.

Q: Did you ever think to yourself, "Boy, I wish we had a much bigger, more powerful..."

Tibbets: Oh, I did. Yes, I did lots of times. As a matter of fact, the St. Lazare raid was, as an example, because of the fact that when we went in there we suffered terrific losses and we accomplished very little. That is, we didn't have an armor-piercing bomb and this dictated the fact that we had to have them. So naturally ~~your~~ ^{your} first reaction was that well these bombs are so small; if we had something bigger, we ~~can~~ ^{could} blast. In other words the idea: if you make a flight and encounter the potential dangers and hazards and you don't accomplish very much, it's damn discouraging. So, sure, the bigger they come the better off you like them.

Q: Do any of your raids in North Africa stand out in your mind as being particularly...

Tibbets: No. I had milk runs in North Africa. I bombed Bizerte, and I'm sure that you and everyone else has heard of Bizerte, but it was a port on the Tunisian ~~mainland~~^{coast} and closest to Italy and the Germans used that as a regular supply line to North Africa and to Rommel's forces and so on. So we had that thing on almost a daily basis; we had to take off and go up there and blast the ships in the harbor and try to blast the aircraft on the airports, and so on. And it got down to the point where you could almost set your watch by the time we'd be there. But it was a necessity. It was certainly undesirable, but it had to be done because Bizerte was an awful rough place.

Q: How did you get into the testing of the B-29?

Tibbets: Well, ~~I was the first officer, staff officer;~~ I was Lt. Colonel at the time and had flown what they considered a normal tour of operations in North Africa and I had completed it early because as I said I'd been the so-called Air Exec and I flew on every mission we went on. And General Arnold had sent a message to General Doolittle back in Africa asking him, Doolittle, to send back his most experienced bomber man to work on this new B-29 that was under development. So General Doolittle had sent my name back as the person to go back for this particular task. Well, the B-29 ran into difficulty before I was ordered back in that Eddie Allen, the Boeing test pilot, crashed that one into

that Seattle meat plant. Anyway, one of the two flying models of the B-29 had Eddie Allen, who was an outstanding aeronautical engineer and test pilot, and a crew of Boeing technicians were on this thing and it caught fire and crashed into this meatpacking plant. And as a result, the Boeing Co. threw their hands up in the air and decided this wasn't an airplane to build; they didn't want anything to do with it. So, what the other ramifications were I'm certainly not prepared to say because I wasn't there. But anyway the Air Force took the thing over and said it's got to be built, so they put the best production type people that they had to work with the Boeing people, and it was decided that we were going ahead with this, we were going to develop it, despite the apparent way that it looked as not being too good a flying machine. And so all of this effort was concentrated at Wichita.

Well, I finally then got instructions to come back to the United States and to get onto this thing, but by the time I got into the program it was in July of '43 and so they sent me to Wichita and at Wichita you might say that I got into the airplane with printed instructions in one hand and the throttle in the other hand and away we went. And I became--I guess the best way to say it is that I got more experience than anybody else wearing a uniform with a B-29, and the more I got, the more deep I got into it and I got into all phases the fastest. At one time, they used to call me Mr. B-29. I worked then all the way through '43 and up into '44 on all the flying phases of the airplane and all the gunner phases of it and the bombing phases. Well, I just helped bring the whole thing through.

And I had just gotten off the experimental and developmental phase of this airplane when I got assigned to start with General Frank Armstrong a school to teach instructor pilots to be B-29 instructors. I got into this thing and just almost got myself a placard to put on my desk with my name on it when I got this call assigning me to bomb project.

Q: You said before that you had had more harried experiences in testing than you ever had in actual bombing. Was it the testing of the B-29 that you were referring to?

Tibbets: Yes.

Q: Can you tell me about one or two of the things that were in your mind when you made that comment?

Tibbets: Well, from the point of view of flying, one of the earlier things that occurred to me in flying the B-29 and testing was that since the Boeing Co., at the time I got started in this thing--Eddie Allen had been killed--the ~~Boeing~~ Boeing Co. had no pilots, so it became my duty to fly for the Boeing Co. Whatever they wanted done I did it and so I used to work as one of their flight test pilots and do the various phase testing as it's called. Well, one of the things we had to do was to fly this airplane in weather. Nobody had flown it at night, in weather, or anything else, But we didn't ~~know~~ know much about it, so they waited until they could get a real set of conditions in the Wichita area. They wanted some experience with this airplane on

icing; they wanted to know does the de-icing system work. So, I don't remember the time element at all, but anyway it was in the wintertime and they got a real set of weather between Wichita and Seattle, Washington, on a line in that direction. So we had this airplane with all kinds of instruments in it ~~and~~ it was a completely-instrumented airplane. We started out and headed in the direction of Seattle with the airplane at an altitude and in the middle of this weather. Well, the weather was primarily ice and we got into it and we bit off a little bigger chunk than we could chew really, and some of our systems weren't as operable as they had thought they would be based on their design. And we got into a ~~rough~~ tight spot whereby the airplane was just about reaching the point where it was going to refuse to fly. It was so heavily laden with ice that it just wanted to quit. And we were in a mountainous area at the time; we didn't have the facilities we've got today, so actually we didn't know where we ~~are~~ ^{were}. We had just ~~an~~ a general idea of what area we were in ~~it~~ and that was about all there was to it. So, it became a proposition then of what do you do, and some of the people on the airplane were not being paid to do this and they began to get just a little bit on the excited side and my reaction was, of course, that I had to try to get them out of there. So it was a proposition of making a big gamble on what do we do, and rather ~~to~~ ^{than} proceed as we had planned, ~~why~~, I elected to make a turn in a southerly direction, where I had been briefed that we might find a layer of warmer air, and we got into this warmer air then and finally got some of this ice and stuff to melt off the airplane.

That doesn't sound like too much, but when you're going through it with a bunch of civilians in airplanes, they're not paid to do this kind of stuff and ~~through~~ their knowledge of what's going on in this area is not very good. They get excited, their ~~own~~ efficiency drops. As a matter of fact, they get real exciteable and you don't know what you're going to have to do with them. And that compounded with the problem of handling the airplane, as I say, ~~was~~ ^{is} one of the situations that makes things bad.

Well, the rest of my experiences were involved with fires. It used to be when we'd take the earlier B-29s and fly them, you could hardly get one in the air and bring it back without an engine fire. This was because of many technical reasons that were as yet not developed to the point that an engine is developed today. And remember too that we were building bigger engines for that airplane than any engine we had built to date and there were still unknown or unproven things put into those engines because of wartime necessity. So we had to work them out. We had carburetor troubles that used to cause us to have engine fires. As a matter of fact, the most harried experience I had was that I had an engine catch on fire and burn right out of the wing of the airplane and drop on the ground. Well, this situation, taking about three minutes time, and all of the things going on inside of the airplane in conjunction with this, made it a little more interesting than anything I ever encountered in combat.

Q: You ~~man~~ managed to get down all right?

Tibbets: Oh, yes. We got the airplane back. As I say, the Good

Lord smiled on me.

Q: When you were all through testing the B-29, what was your impression of it?

Tibbets: Oh, I loved that airplane. Oh yes. I had the utmost faith in that airplane from the time I got started on it; I very strongly defended the airplane as such and people used to cuss the engines and say they were no good and never would be any good, ^{but} and I had the utmost faith ~~in~~ in the world in it. ~~I did,~~ ^A At one time, to demonstrate the fact that I had this faith in it, it was necessary for performance reasons to make a flight with the airplane loaded as heavily as the engineers felt you dared ~~handle~~ load it. Well, we took an airplane to Salina, Kansas and the Boeing Co. went out there, and we started loading this airplane up with everything we could get in it, including sacks of lead weight, to get the weight that we wanted in the airplane. We came up with a 165,000 pound airplane. This airplane had been designed ~~to~~ to fly at 120,000. So, getting ready to make this flight, friends of mine in the Air Force wanted to know if I was crazy or not. Well, it became a proposition of taking money out of your pocket and making bets on ~~it~~ whether it would or wouldn't fly, and if it did fly where it goes to break ground; somebody wanted to bet on every part of the performance. And I covered all the bets I could cover because I knew it was going to do it. But I knew one thing, too, that if one of those engines so much as coughed, we would never make it. This was a foregone conclusion, because we were past the critical point; we were on the downside of the curve as far as performance was concerned if one of those

engines didn't develop every horsepower that it was supposed to put out.

Well, we worked on the airplane and I had a good crew taking care of it, and I had the utmost faith in the thing, figuring it was going to work all right. So we lined her up at the end of the runway at the appointed time and started down the runway. The airplane took off, but it took me almost two hours ~~before~~ ^{to} get the airplane to a thousand feet; it was that heavy. I had to burn off that much fuel. I broke ground with it and, of course, we gave the residents of Salina, Kansas a real thrill with it. They had a little four-story hotel out there, I think; we had an awful time missing that hotel because it was about five or six miles off the end of the runway. As I say, it took me two hours to get it up in the air, but it did it, which was one of the things I knew it would do. Of course, that in itself made it an interesting two-hour time period.

Q: Is it true that the first inkling you had of anything on the bomb project involving you was when you heard about some security investigations in your home town?

Tibbets: Yes. I heard that through my dad. As a matter of fact, he wanted to know what I had been doing. I asked him why, and he said, why, people have been down here investigating you. And it ~~came~~ ^{came} about through the fact that a very good ~~friend~~ friend of ours in the postal service, in the secret service part of the postal department, ~~he~~ was a tenant in an apartment building my dad had down there. He got to be such good friends with my dad

that he came around to him and asked him first whether he, my dad, knew if I had been doing anything I shouldn't have been doing. He said he had no idea, because of the war, he didn't see me very often ~~or saw me either~~, and it turns out that they had these investigators down there going through my background. And, of course, because this man was in the secret service part of the postal department, ~~why~~ he had a lot of access to this type of thing going on through his agents and so he put his people to investigate the investigators and came back and told my old man not to worry, that everything ^{was} ~~is~~ all right.

Q: Was it General Ent who gave you the first briefing...

Tibbets: General Ent, yes. Well, he is the man who was in command of the Second Air Force where we were going to be working and he had been called to Washington and briefed by General Arnold and, I think, General Leslie Groves. And at that particular time he had been told that I had been selected and would be the man who would be sent out there and that he, General Ent, would acquaint me with the problems and introduce me to the military and scientific element with the Manhattan Project. And this occurred in his office in Colorado Springs.

Q: What were your thoughts when you began to understand the enormity of the bomb involved?

Tibbets: You're asking me a real knotty problem. I didn't have too many thoughts and the reason that I didn't--and I've offered

this explanation before, which I think is probably the most valid-- I've tried to figure in my own mind what ~~is~~ the answer to that question. Well, sure, I thought a lot of things, and I thought, "Well, gee, this thing is going to make a big bang," and all of that type of nonsense. But on the other hand, I didn't have the ability to visualize what this thing really was, and I think by the same token not too many people did either. I don't think these people working on this thing had any idea. There was no measure, no scale, by which to judge this thing. We all said, "Gee whiz, it's going to be a big ~~boom~~ bang because it's going to look like 20,000 tons of TNT." Well, nobody had ever seen 20,000 tons of TNT go up. You just imagined that it would be a big explosion. And, of course, many of these side effects of the thing, ~~they~~ weren't even discussed. Now whether they were thought of or not is something I can't say.

Q: When was it that you first became involved with the program?

Tibbets: September of '44, I'm sure it was. We didn't get in business, we didn't get to do anything until late October and early November, but I began to get briefings on it, I got acquainted with the thing, I was sent out to select a site where we could do our training and operating and all that business. So I got into it a little bit on the earlier side.

Q: What was that thing about Lansdale's one big question that decided whether you were to be the man?

Tibbets: Oh, that's a big secret.

Q: That's a big secret. He asked you one question and that decided...

Tibbets: He asked me one question--well, he asked me two or three questions--now, why he asked me these questions, I think, was more psychological than anything else, because he wanted to see what kind of answer I would give him. In other words, he was going to test my honesty so to speak. Well, of course, based on the way one of these particular questions ^{was} ~~that he~~ asked me, I figured that if he even knew enough to ask me that question, I couldn't do anything but tell him that he was exactly right. I knew that he had me cold. There were only three people in the United States who knew that question--me being one of them.

Q: In other words, it was a personal matter.

Tibbets: It was a personal matter and why and how it could become part of an investigation and how anybody making the investigation ever stumbled on that one, I'll never know to this day. The only thing I can say is that the man making the investigation was "Mr. Thorough" himself.

Q: And you've never revealed what the question was?

Tibbets: Oh, no. I'll sit on that one, and I'm sure that even today Lansdale himself would never remember the question, because he did this: He said, "Here is this dossier on you and when this

job is done and finished, this is the only copy of it and it will be burned. You'll never get it and nobody will get it." I've never asked him if that did happen. I have just accepted it, ~~and~~ ~~not~~ knowing the honesty and integrity of those people and the manner in which they operated, the question never occurred to me.

Q: The headquarters were out at Wendover in Utah, right?

Tibbets: That's where I had my so-called group headquarters, yes.

Q: And this was referred to as Operation Silverplate.

Tibbets: Yes, that was Silverplate.

Q: I know there was a mixup; there was another Operation Silverplate.

Tibbets: You see, Silverplate was a codename assigned. It made it much easier to make reference to this project. Anybody that knew Silverplate either had one or ~~more~~ another set of instructions. ^{To them} They, whoever they ~~was~~ might be, Silverplate could mean that in their capacity, whatever it might be, they would give every support and every resource that they had to that project if it was asked for under the name of Silverplate. They might not know anything else. Their instructions were that if we asked for the moon, if they could reach and get it, they'd do it. The other was that a certain few selected people had to know exactly what the project was for other reasons. And they in turn could refer to this, if they were doing something, with some counterpart, or they could do whatever was necessary saying, "This is for

Silverplate," or "Project Silverplate has to do this, "~~or~~
~~something else~~. It was the magic word.

Q: I know there were innumerable aspects of this. There were the men who were working with dummy bombs, learning every inch of it, and so forth. Would I be right in assuming that your major concern was with training the crew for the dropping?

Tibbets: Well, this was a major concern, yes. Now, my directive was as broad as any directive anybody could get. In other words, through General Ent, General Arnold's instructions were that I would prepare an Air Force organization capable of delivering this weapon anywhere in the world, that I would also be capable of a split operation. In other words, he was figuring that if Germany didn't fold up, ~~that~~ we would have an organization that could go to Germany and one to the Pacific at the same time, and more or less make a simultaneous deal out of it. So, this was my broad directive. Well, little had been done up to this point in the way of developing, ~~the carrier~~ first, the carrier--the B-29 wasn't developed to do this job. Some people had been working on it, yes, but the scientists were not firm enough in their design of this weapon that they could come out and say that this is exactly this way. Remember, when you're talking about all these things that have to be done, you have to get down to fractions of an inch, you have to design hardware to go in and fit and to make it adaptable and all of these things that go with it. Okay, so little had been done. First off, I had to get an organization that could do not only the bombing job when it was

ready to go, but I had to get an organization that could work with these scientists to do all the experimental work necessary to get it ready to go. So we were running a dual operation, and I had four or five airplanes set aside all the time that were working with the scientific element; these were our development airplanes. We had some other airplanes ~~around~~ over here that were in a squadron, so to speak, where crews worked and these guys were getting trained all the time, trained to fly these airplanes, do anything with them that we wanted them to do. And they were getting all kinds of practice with precision bombing just using one 500 ~~pound~~ pound bomb at a time, which they couldn't understand, that is, why we had to have such accuracy. Then it became quite a challenge and real interesting. We had to have them navigate and arrive at a point within seconds, whereby their ^{precision} training had been that if ^{they} got there within a ten-minute interval ~~before~~, it was all right, just as long as they got there. Well, anyway, this became a precision operation as such and it was necessary to train each of these people to do his job in that manner.

So, ~~consequently~~ we developed an organization and we had the capability to do a split operation. We engineered this thing all the way through.

Q: You mentioned accuracy training. Is it ~~true~~ true that they had to learn to drop a bomb into a 900-foot circle from 30,000 feet?

Tibbets: Well, 900 feet is way outside; actually we were shooting for 25 ^{feet} feet. We worked on that basis. Well, on our bombing range in the salt flats out there, we had concentric circles, yes. Each

^{was} one so far out from the bull's eye, and the center circle was 25 feet, and there were 100-foot rings past that. ~~So we were~~ ~~marking~~, the majority of our ~~bombardiers~~ bombardiers under normal conditions--well, let's put it, under good conditions--^{they'd} get them right at the 25-foot^{ed}. In other words, ~~everything that we did~~ and I think all of our crews stayed inside of 200 feet all the time. Well, this in those days was rather phenomenal bombing. They didn't do it right away; they did it after we drilled and drilled and drilled and ~~work~~ worked on it. But what this meant was, you see, each crew had ~~their~~ its own airplane, each bombardier had his own bombsight--he worked with the same piece of equipment all the time--and the so-called ballistic tables and one thing or another that were given to us, we found out ~~that~~ were just compromises, they weren't correct. But this guy, after he ~~worked~~ worked for weeks on end with his bombsight, his same airplane, and with a certain set of tables, developed his own tables, because he found that if he used this data as proscribed by this table time after time, he put the bomb in the same place but it was displaced from where he wanted it to be. So this is what happened. We taught these guys to be able to do this kind of work on their own hook, because, Lord, we didn't have any idea whether somebody was going to be able to stand up and hand him the data and say this is all you have to do. In other words, we didn't want these fellows depending on anybody. They had to do it themselves; this was the key to the operation. The whole airplane ~~group~~ crew had to be self-sustaining, self-confident and an efficient outfit.

Q: What about the turn-away business; after the dropping of the

bomb, the idea was to turn and then go back. Was this normal flying procedure?

Tibbets: No, this was not normal procedure. This was something nobody understood; we had an ~~am~~ awful time explaining it. I did the development on this myself because of my experience with the B-29. We faced one problem: The idea was that we had to get the airplane out of there, so what ^{was} ~~is~~ the quickest way to get it out. Remember, this ~~intermediate~~ airplane was not a very fast airplane in terms of what we think today. And we couldn't drop the weapon from an altitude and allow the normal trajectory to let it fall and explode because ~~by the time~~, if the airplane continued straight ahead, it would be right over ^{the weapon} ~~it~~ when it blew up. So what we had to do was to release it and then get the most distance. It just happens mathematically, if you turn and get tangent to a circle, ~~and~~ an expanding circle above this explosion point, you're getting the most distance from it. All right, this happened to be 155 degrees, I think it was, that you had to turn from the direction in which you were going. And when you had turned 155 degrees and levelled out, the time available to you then for that airplane to proceed at its speed gave you the greatest distance from the point of explosion. ~~And the airplane at altitude,~~ we had to fly ^{the plane} ~~it~~ at this high altitude, and because it was underpowered and couldn't fly too fast, you'd run into aerodynamic problems on surfaces. Well, the tail of the airplane is stalled; in other words, you had ~~am~~ to turn it up into a bank, a tight bank, and in order to keep it turning and flying you had to keep getting this bank tighter all the time; that is,

if you want to make the most number of degrees per second in turning. So you get up there and you get into a real tight bank, okay; this throws an aerodynamic load on the tail that the tail wasn't designed to take. And the first thing that happens is that you begin to stall the tail. Well, if you don't recognize this stall, you can destroy the airplane real quick. And this did happen on one occasion, not to a crew of mine but to a crew that belonged to the M.C. The pilot flying it didn't believe what I told him. But, anyway, I had gone up there and I had it worked out and I taught each one of my pilots individually. I took them up to 30,000 feet and I put this airplane time and time again into this bank, and I taught them the feel of this airplane, the way it was acting when you did this, and how far you could go with it and where you had to stop. So I got each one of them so that they could make this turn right on the critical edge. A little bit more was too far, and a little bit less wasn't far enough. So we were able to work this thing out, and it worked very fine then. Today, that's a common practice also with airplanes, but you can still stall them out if you go to the extreme, but you don't have to go to the extreme as we had to go with that one.

Q: What was the story about an observer on one of the test flights who threw the switch before it should have been thrown and a dummy bomb was dropped?

Tibbets: Well, this happened on a practice release out there on the salt flats. The boy got excited and he did--just exactly what happened I don't know. All that I know is that the bomb

fell about twenty or thirty seconds before we were expecting it to fall. This meant that it hit about a mile away on the ground from where it should have hit, and nobody was prepared for it. It caused no harm; it just highlighted the fact that here is a safety precaution we'd ^{have} get to take; we've got to fix this airplane so that he can't do this in actuality, which led to a modification so that it couldn't happen.

Q: The operation moved to Tinian. When was that?

Tibbets: Oh, Lordy! ~~They went out the~~ first element of the group started moving out, I'm quite sure that it was in April of '44. It was a surface movement, by vessel, of the first bunch. Now, the airplanes did not go until ~~they went in~~ the last part of June.

Q: You had no actual bomb until right before the raid, is that right?

Tibbets: We had no weapon. We had shapes, weapons similar to it, which we used for ballistic purposes, for practice.

Q: Did you make any practice raid on Japan?

Tibbets: I did not. They wouldn't let me. Because I was going to take the actual weapon with me, they wouldn't let me go up there and practice, but some of our crews did go up there on practice, and they used a shape similar to the thing. We called it "fat man," which was just a 10,000 pound explosive.

Q: As the day of the raid approached, what were the things that you personally were worried about? What did you think were the things that would be most likely to go wrong?

Tibbets: Well, I didn't single out anything in particular that might be the thing that might go wrong, or most likely to go wrong. I had a real serious concern naturally that the operation would go right. I had this feeling because I had so much confidence in this outfit. I had been given carte blanche to train this thing and do anything I wanted with it. I had the best equipment that the Air Force and the Government could furnish. Well, as long as I had these things, my concern was this: Have I overlooked anything? Have I made a mistake anywhere? And this was my concern: Whether or not I had omitted something by not visualizing it, or had I not assessed everything exactly right and come up with the right evaluation of it. These were my primary concerns. I wasn't worried about the weapon not working. I wasn't worried until it was released from the airplane, and while it was falling down and I was turning away from it, I kept saying, "I wish that damned thing would blow."

Q: How long before did you know the day on which you were going?

Tibbets: Oh, Lord, I knew that back in June or July. Yes, I was called into Washington and right there in General Arnold's office we selected that date.

Q: What was done to the plane? It had no guns on it.

Tibbets: No. I had taken them off. I had to get the weight out of that airplane so I could get it up there to make that turn. I had to lighten it.

Q: How many crew members were there on the airplane?

Tibbets: There were 13 of us on the airplane.

Q: How were you escorted from the Marianas?

Tibbets: Well, this arises in a method that we had to use to execute the plan. You probably read that we sent weather planes out first to the three targets. Okay. Then we prepared three more airplanes, my plane and two others, to take off. Now, the two others were to go along and carry a couple of these scientists who had been working on this weapon, along with a certain type of ~~instruments that they wanted to be~~ blast recording instruments, so that they would have the knowledge of what ~~was~~ ^{was} the force of this weapon when it exploded; they had to measure that. Well, in addition to that, we had to have some people with photographic type ~~of~~ equipment; since it was going to be the first one of its type, we wanted to get the best coverage we could and we couldn't of course advise the Army Motion Picture Service to stand out with the cameras and get ready, you see. So we had to do it all ourselves. The idea was then that I would fly into the target and at one minute away from the target, I would give a tone signal and they would start to turn their airplanes in 180 degree turn so that the backs of the airplanes would be towards the target area at the time the weapon exploded. So it takes two

minutes to make the turn at 180 so I gave them one-minute lead to get around and start; ~~at~~ the time ~~that~~ the weapon would be falling would be the additional time that they needed to get their airplanes in a 180 degrees. So this is what happened: one on each side. We went in on the bomb run. They were flying a loose and wide formation on me; they were about a quarter of a mile out on either side of me and behind me. So there was no problem there. We put the tone signal on the radio; this is what they were waiting for; they knew what it was supposed to be, and the minute that ^{tone} ~~turn~~ went on they started to move away from me. Well, it was nothing complicated at all.

Q: How was your weather that day?

Tibbets: Well, practically perfect.

Q: How long did it take you to get from your base to the target?

Tibbets: Oh, dear me. Around seven hours or something.

Q: Did you run into any Japanese at all?

Tibbets: No. We had fooled them. We had lulled the Japanese into a sense of false security, because I had sent ahead of time-- for a week or ten $\frac{1}{2}$ days--an airplane up over these targets to do just exactly what we were doing, a single airplane coming in all alone. I wanted them to think that we were photographic reconnaissance airplanes. I felt that if they thought we were

photographic reconnaissance airplanes, they wouldn't waste their efforts on us because they would know that no matter what they did, we still were going to get pictures. And apparently this is exactly--from what I've heard from Japanese sources, ~~this is~~ exactly what they thought. They looked up and saw this and said well, here ~~is~~ it is 11 o'clock in the morning, or whatever time it was, and ~~is~~ here's our photographic airplane coming back again.

Q: It went completely according to schedule from the base to the target?

Tibbets: As far as I was concerned, it was a perfect operation.

Q: Then you made your turn without any trouble.

Tibbets: Yes, we got out of there without any trouble.

Q: You heard the blast...

Tibbets: Yes, we heard it and we felt it; it rocked us and it went exactly as they said it would. ~~is~~ In other words, we made ~~our~~ our turn and as we levelled out of our turn the flash occurred and right after the flash occurred the man in the tail gunner's position in the airplane--a fellow by the name of George Caren--said, "I ~~can~~ can see it coming," meaning the shockwave. He had been told to watch for this as we were going into the target; we told him he would see this ring shockwave. And he said, "I see it coming, and I see two more right behind it." Well, by the time

he said that, the first one hit us. Well, the second hit us with less force and the third one hit us but it was just very negligible. The first one was a real wallop; it was a real bang. It made a lot of noise and it shook the airplane real good.

Q: Your back was to it?

Tibbets: Oh, yes., we were tangent to this thing, so it came up and hit us from the rear.

Q: Did you linger around to look?

Tibbets: No. As I told you, the turn was 155 degrees, we made the turn. Now one thing ^{happened} that had not been programmed, well, any way, as the ^{first} shockwave hit us, then ~~when~~ the second ~~one hit us~~ and the third ~~was~~ right behind ~~me~~ it, Karen was saying, "Oh, my gosh, what a mess!" So I had turned the 155 degrees, we got hit and I rolled right into another bank, a little bit easier this time, and came right on around, because with all this going on I wanted to get a look at it. We were out--actually they calculated that we were 11 miles away slant-range, when it started and by the time I made my turn and came back in, I wasn't a bit closer. As we nosed around and came to it there was the old mushroom growing up and we watched her blossom. And down below it--I have said that the thing reminded me more of a boiling pot of tar than any other description I can give it. This is the way it looked. It was black and boiling underneath with a steam haze on top of it. And, of course, we had seen the city when we went

in and there was nothing to see when we came back. It was covered by this boiling, black-looking mass. Well, anyway, we had a couple of cameras in the nose of the airplane, so we made some photographs real quickly and as we did that we approached this big cloud. Well, I of course knew I didn't want to fly into that cloud; I knew it was hot with radiation. So we turned off. I tried to judge my distance to stay a couple of miles away from this cloud.

My next thought was this: We bombed at 33,000 feet and my next thought was, well, if the Japanese get wind of this thing they might try any type of a method they can to get this airplane; I mean, any last resort thing that they could do, they might try to get it. So, I was immediately concerned and had everybody alerted--and in the other two airplanes, we broke radio silence and started talking to them and I told them, "Now, watch for fighters of any type." And, I've forgotten the distance we had to go to depart the coastline--it wasn't too far--well, anyway at 33,000 feet I told these other boys flying these airplanes, "Okay, now let's nose them down a little bit, get all the air speed we can, and let's get off shore as fast as we can get off shore and over the water." Because I knew that if they shot us down over the water, there would be Navy vessels and stuff out there, submarines and that sort of thing, to try to pick us up. So I said that if they were going ~~any~~ to get us, I don't want them to do it over land; I'd rather get it over the water and we'd have a better chance to get away from them. Of course we did, we got off. We did see one fighter, one fighter started up, but he stayed clear away from us, didn't come anywhere near us. And

so by that time we were out over the water and on our way back home, and it was an easy flight home.

Q: What was the ~~mood~~ mood of the men on the ship after you knew that you weren't going to meet any Japanese fighters?

Tibbets: The mood was very quiet. I don't think it was because they knew that they weren't going to get fighters or that nothing was going to bother them, I mean, everybody was tired. Okay, it was all over. Here we were out over the water and everybody knew that it was just a ride home now, so actually we took turns sleeping. I had laid down and slept for about a hour, I guess.

Q: Would you say that the mood, the general idea, was that this was just a great big bomb?

Tibbets: The reaction didn't set in for another day. It was the next day before it set in. This didn't impress the guys who were in ^{the} outfit working on the airplanes until the information was public, and it hit these ^{other} organizations on the Island. And then when they came in there with their eyes wide opened and asked, "Jesus, is this true?" then these guys began to think. They were too close to the problem. So they weren't excited by it; nothing happened till later, a delayed reaction set in. Then, of course, everybody got to feeling real proud of the part he got to play in it. I imagine some pretty wild tales flew around too; stories got pretty big.

Q: Have you kept in touch with the 13 men who were in the crew?

Tibbets: Well, one of the men is dead now. This was Admiral Parsons--he was a Captain at that time, a Navy man--he died of a heart attack out in the Mediterranean. Let me put it this way, I have ~~not~~ kept track of ~~him~~ two or three of them: my bombardier, Tom ~~Felice~~, he's up at Savannah, Georgia now; George Karen--this man I mentioned--he's up at Denver, Colorado; they are the only two fellows I've kept anywhere near close touch with.

Q: Do you know whether any of the men in your crews were mentally affected?

Tibbets: No, they ^{weren't} haven't. That's a lot of bunk.

Q: What do you feel, looking back on it, well, as far as your association with this ~~horrific~~ horror?

Tibbets: Well, okay, I'll have to sound real coldblooded to you but then I can explain my reasons. I felt nothing about it. I was told, as a military person, to do something. I recognized, as somebody said a long time ago, war is hell. This wasn't anything personal as far as I'm concerned, so I had no personal part in it; I don't let my personal feelings get mixed up in it. ~~I recognize~~ I don't know how many people were killed--I don't want anybody to get killed; ~~I mean~~ ^{but} let's face it, if you're going to fight a war, you fight it to win and use any method you can and somebody's going to get hurt. All right, if you can kill a mess of them at one time and get it over with that much quicker, I think you're better off in the long run. So, as I say, I was following

instructions, I was carrying out an order I had been issued by competent authority; it wasn't my decision to make morally, one way or the other. I did what I was told; it was a success as far as I was concerned, and that's where I've left it. I can assure you that I can sleep just as peacefully at night as anybody can sleep.

Q: Where did the name Ehola Gay come from?

Tibbets: Well, that's my mother's name, and I understand that Ehola ^{was} is an Indian name of some type or other. My mother was a woman from Iowa and her mother heard this name somewhere back in the days of wagon trains, and so she was named Ehola and Gay was an attachment put on it.

Q: Would you like to say something about your activities since the end of the War and bring us up to date.

Tibbets: Well, at the end of the War I got put into school to get a little more military education. I went out of there to Washington and spent three years there, and then I got back into the flight test business again with the B-47.

Q: Any harried experiences with that?

Tibbets: Oh, yes, I've had some fun with the B-47 and all kinds of things happened to me, a repetition of the B-29, with engine fires; and one thing or another, tangles with weather and all that.

I mean, there's no use isolating any specific thing. Gee whiz any fellow who's been lucky enough to fly all the years I have, you've had a lot of experiences that are, shall we say, different.

Q: How long have you been testing?

Tibbets: Well, fifteen years ~~almost~~ of my military service, ~~almost-fifteen years~~ was testing. I love it.

Q: And when did you get your star?

Tibbets: I got it last May.

Q: And would you say a bit about your activities down here now.

Tibbets: Well, I'm an ordinary Strategic Air Command division commander here, meaning that I have three wings ~~and~~ of B-47s operating under me, three bases: MacDill, McCoy at Orlando, and Hunter at Savannah, Georgia. Here we have a tanker squadron of KC-97s and at Hunter a tanker squadron of KC-97s, but none at McCoy. So three B-47 wings and ~~and~~ two tanker squadrons. We have overseas bases that we operate "reflex" on by both McCoy and Savannah. This base does not; they operate on home ^{base} alert ~~base~~ here. My everyday activity is just insuring that each of those three organizations and the people are prepared to execute their war mission; ~~insuring~~, that is basically what it amounts to. It keeps me busy.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to discuss in connection

with the dropping of the A-Bomb, anything that you feel that has ~~been~~ not been properly developed, or anything more you want to say?

Tibbets: Well, ~~as I say~~, I don't know. I think no, ~~I say~~ there's only one thing: it's regrettable, the publicity I got from it. I regret that, which can't be helped. I mean anybody wearing a uniform can't afford to be a popular public figure; he creates too many jealousies and in this thing there were too many instances that worked against me. Now, to what degree they worked against me I'm not prepared to say. ~~I mean~~, I've run into some harried experiences on that basis with people I didn't even know. But, as I say, my name happened to get pretty well distributed throughout the United States and as a result of that it caused difficulties that I ^{am} ~~was~~ sure I would not have encountered otherwise. Although, of course, I don't know what would have happened otherwise either. But it's something for, ~~possibly~~ possibly, the historians or something, I don't know.

Q: Thank you very much, Sir.

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