THE ENOLA GAY

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE PLANE AFTER IT DROPPED THE ATOMIC BOMB AND THE MAJOR PROBLEMS CONCERNING ITS DISPLAY IN THE SMITHSONIAN MUJJSEUM

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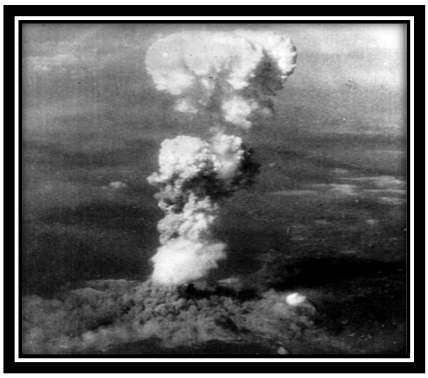


TIME

ARTICLE UPDATED
AUG 6, 2019

Seventy years ago, the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan, bringing an end to a long and devastating World War II and making the Enola Gay, the B-29 that delivered it, one of the most famous in history.

It's a plane with a huge, controversial, world-changing story to tell

After the Enola Gay dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan, on Aug. 6, 1945, "a city died, and 70,000 of its inhabitants." The B-29 bomber stayed airborne, hovering above a terrifying mushroom cloud.

An ethical debate over the decision to use nuclear weapons has continued for more than 70 years — *and that has extended to questions about the plane itself.*

The *Enola Gay* is a B-29 Superfortress, which pilot Paul Tibbets named after his mother, *and which had been stripped of everything but the necessities, to be thousands of pounds lighter than an ordinary plane of that make*. In 1945, it was given an important task. "It was just like any other mission: some people are reading books, some are taking naps. When the bomb left the airplane, the plane jumped because you released 10,000 lbs.," Theodore Van Kirk, the plane's navigator, later recalled. "Immediately [Tibbets] took the airplane to a 180° turn. We lost 2,000 ft. on the turn and ran away as fast as we could. Then it exploded. All we saw in the airplane was a bright flash. Shortly after that, the first shock wave hit us, and the plane snapped all over."

The plane returned to Tinian Island, from which it had come. A few days later, on Aug. 9, the U.S. dropped another atomic bomb, this time on Nagasaki. While it did not drop the bomb on Nagasaki, *the Enola Gay did take flight to get data on the weather in the lead-up to the second strike on Japan.*

Enola Gay returns to Tinian Island after dropping the bomb on Hiroshima

After the war, the airplane took flight a few more times. In the aftermath of World War II, the Army Air Forces flew the *Enola Gay* during an atomic test program in the Pacific; it was then delivered to be stored in an airfield in Arizona before being flown to Illinois and transferred to the Smithsonian in July 1949*. But even under the custody of the museum, the Enola Gay remained at an Air Force base in Texas.*

It took its last flight in 1953, arriving on Dec. 2 at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. As the Smithsonian recounts*, it stayed there until August of 1960, until preservationists grew worried that the decay of the historic artifact would reach a point of no return if it stayed outside much longer*. Smithsonian staffers took the plane apart into smaller pieces and moved it inside.

By the time the 50th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Japan approached, the Smithsonian had already spent nearly a decade restoring the plane for exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum. *But when the nearly 600-page proposal for the exhibit was seen by Air Force veterans, the anniversary started a new round of controversy over the plane, as TIME explained in 1994:*

The display, say the vets, is tilted against the U.S., portraying it as an unfeeling aggressor, while paying an inordinate amount of attention to Japanese suffering. Too little is made of Tokyo's atrocities, the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, or the recalcitrance of Japan's military leaders in the late stages of the war — the catalyst for the deployment of atomic weapons. John T. Correll, editor in chief of *Air Force Magazine*, noted that in the first draft, *there were 49 photos of Japanese casualties, against only three photos of American casualties*. By his count, there were four pages of text on Japanese atrocities, while there were 79 pages devoted to Japanese casualties and civilian suffering, from not only the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki but also conventional B-29 bombing. The Committee for the Restoration and Display of the *Enola Gay* now has 9,000 signatures of protest. The Air Force Association claims the proposed exhibition is "*a slap in the face to all Americans who fought in World War II*" and "treats Japan and the U.S. as if their participation in the war were morally equivalent.

"Politicians are getting in on the action. A few weeks ago, Kansas Senator Nancy Kassebaum fired off a letter to Robert McCormick Adams, secretary of the Smithsonian. She called the proposal "a travesty" and suggested that "the famed B-29 be displayed with understanding and pride in another museum. Any one of three Kansas museums."

Adams, who is leaving his job after 10 relatively controversy-free years, sent back a three-page answer stiffly turning down her request for the *Enola Gay*. The proposed script, he says, was in flux, and would be "objective," treat U.S. airmen as "skilled, brave, loyal" and would not make a judgment on "the morality of the decision [to drop the bomb]."

Meanwhile, curators Tom Crouch and Michael Neufeld, who are responsible for the content of the display, deny accusations of political correctness. Crouch claims that the critics have a "reluctance to tell the whole story. *They want to stop the story when the bomb leaves the bomb bay*." Crouch and Neufeld's proposed display includes a "Ground Zero" section, described as the emotional center of the gallery. Among the sights: are charred bodies in the rubble, the ruins of a Shinto shrine, a heat-fused rosary, and items belonging to dead schoolchildren. *The curators have proposed a PARENTAL DISCRETION sign for the show.*

The veterans, for their part, say they are well aware of the grim nature of the subject. They are not asking for a whitewash. "Nobody is looking for glorification," says Correll. *"Just be fair. Tell both sides."*

Demonstrators protest at the Enola Gay exhibit at the the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum's Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center, on its opening day, Dec. 15, 2003, in Chantilly, Va.

Eventually, the criticism from veterans, Congress, and others resulted in major changes to the exhibition. **"[The show] will no longer include a long section on the postwar nuclear race that veterans groups and members of Congress had criticized. The critics said that the discussion did not belong in the exhibit and was part of a politically loaded message that the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan began a dark chapter in human history," the New York *Times* reported. *That version of the exhibition opened in 1995, displaying more than half of the plane, the restoration of which was still unfinished.***

But the exhibition proved popular. When it closed in 1998, about four million people had visited it, according to a report by *Air Force Magazine*'s Correll — the most ever to visit an Air and Space Museum special exhibition to that point.

It would take until 2003 for the full plane to be displayed, at the Air and Space Museum's location in Chantilly, Va. That opening again provoked protest, but it can still be *seen there.*

The Enola Gay now sits on display at the Udvar-Hazy Center in Chantilly, Va

And as long as it is on display, the questions it raises are likely to continue — after all, they have been with the *Enola Gay* since it first became a household name.

Even on board, the men who flew the plane knew as much. Van Kirk, the navigator, later described the crew as having had the immediate thought that, "This war is over." And copilot Robert A. Lewis kept a personal log of the mission, which — when it was later made public — offered a look at what else they were thinking. "I honestly have the feeling of groping for words to explain this," he wrote of the moments after the mushroom cloud rose, "*or I might say My God what have we done."*

The Enola Gay with her crew that dropped the bomb

HISTORY/PRODUCTION OF THE ENOLA GAY

The famous B-29 Superfortress rolled off the Glenn L. Martin assembly line in the spring of 1945 with what was *known as a silverplate modification specifically for the atomic mission.*

"All of the armor that protects the crew was removed to save weight," said Dr. Jeremy Kinney, the Air and Space Museum's curator of American military aviation, 1919-1945. "You have a 10,000-pound atomic bomb you have to carry, so you have to lighten the airplane."

The remote-controlled gun turrets were also taken away to increase speed. Only the tail gun position was left to defend it from enemies.

CREW DRAMA

The Enola Gay, known only as No. 82 then, was flown by Army Air Forces Capt. Robert Lewis, of the 509th Composite Group, from the factory to New Mexico, then to Tinian in the Mariana Islands, where its crew practiced flight maneuvers, loading the massive bomb and dropping it.

But Lewis would not end up leading the atomic mission. That role belonged to Col. Paul Tibbets Jr., the commander of the 509th. He handpicked the plane the night before the mission, to the surprise of its crew, and had his mother's name — Enola Gay — painted on its side.

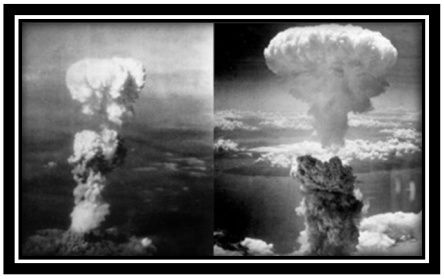
"There was some animosity between [Lewis and Tibbets], because … a lot of Lewis' crew was bumped," Kinney said. "Lewis himself was bumped from command pilot to co-pilot."

A NEW ERA – A JOB COMPLETE

In the early morning hours of Aug. 6, 1945, the Enola Gay took off for Hiroshima, an important Japanese military center. Around 8:15 a.m., on a calm, sunny morning, bombardier Maj. Thomas Ferebee dropped Little Boy — a 10,000-pound, uranium-enriched bomb — which detonated 1,800 feet above the city's center. In one blinding flash, it leveled the heart of Hiroshima with the equivalent of 15,000 tons of TNT.

It was a moment for which none of the Enola Gay's crew — miles away by then, but still rocked by the blast — was quite prepared. What's horrifying about this mission is that it's one bomber, one bomb, and one city.

"I think that sank in with them, in the sense that you see the mushroom cloud and this firestorm and this city in ruin," Kinney said. "I don't think they understood it until they saw it."



Atomic bomb mushroom clouds over Hiroshima (left) and Nagasaki (right).

***At the moment of impact, those closest to ground zero turned to charcoal, while birds reportedly ignited in mid-air. Around 70,000 people died from the initial blast, according to the U.S. Department of Energy*, while tens of thousands more perished in the coming weeks due to radiation poisoning.**

The bombing brought controversy as it ushered in the nuclear age, but the crew was just doing its job, and it was clear they believed in what they did.

"[They] felt very strongly that the use of the atomic bomb ended World War II in the Pacific," Kinney said. "They recognized the loss of life and what that meant to the Japanese people, but they felt like it was necessary because they didn't want more Americans to die in what they thought would be a bloody, long invasion [of Japan]."

ENOLA GAY'S MISSION IN THE NAGASAKI BOMBING

The more powerful plutonium bomb known as Fat Man was dropped on Nagasaki three days later by Bockscar, another B-29. Only one member of the Hiroshima mission was on it: Lt. Jacob Beser, the radar operator who tracked both bombs as they fell.

What some don't know is that the Enola Gay flew that mission, too.

"Usually it's a three to four-ship formation. Some fly ahead to check the weather to see what it's like at the actual target, and Enola Gay was part of that for Nagasaki," Kinney said.

THE LATER YEARS

After the bombings and the war's quick end, the Enola Gay remained with the Army Air Forces, taking part in the Bikini Atoll atomic tests before being shipped to the Smithsonian in 1960. It was then put in storage near Andrews Air Force Base, completely disassembled.

The wings of the Enola Gay are reunited with the fuselage for the first time since 1960 by National Air and Space Museum restoration specialists at the Udvar-Hazy Center, on April 10, 2003

"The wings were off. The tail was off. It was all in big pieces," Kinney said.

It sat that way until 1984 when officials finally decided to fix it up, piece by piece. *It took about 10 years and 300,000 hours to restore.*

"Every square inch of the duralumin surface has been polished. The engines have been completely overhauled, and the propellers," Kinney said. "It had some fat men painted under the pilots' windows to indicate the Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Bikini missions. Those were taken off because the decision was to restore it to a particular moment [before Hiroshima]."

The plane wasn't fully reassembled until 2003, when it was put on display in its full glory at the Air & Space Museum's Udvar-Hazy Center in Chantilly, Virginia. *The original painting* of the words "Enola Gay" can still be seen on its side.

While no members of the crew that flew the Enola Gay remain to tell its story, the aircraft lives on for visitors.

"Enola Gay is a recognized airplane of World War II, and people want to see it," Kinney said. "They want to see the spaceship Discovery, they want to see the [SR-71] Blackbird, and they want to see the Enola Gay."

THEN **NOW**

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