

= 1945 Japan ? Washington flight =

The 1945 Japan ? Washington flight was a record @-@ breaking air voyage made by three specially modified Boeing B @-@ 29 Superfortresses on September 18 ? 19 , 1945 , from the northern Japanese island of Hokkaid? to Chicago in the Midwestern United States , continuing to Washington , D.C. The flight was made by three United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) generals and other airmen returning to the United States from their overseas duty after World War II . At that date , it involved the heaviest load carried by an American aircraft (144 @,@ 000 lb , 65 @,@ 300 kg) , the longest nonstop flight made by the USAAF (5 @,@ 840 mi , 9 @,@ 400 km) , and the first nonstop flight from Japan to the United States made with a complete aircraft . However the flight did not break the then @-@ world distance record established by the Royal Air Force in 1938 .

Originally intending to fly 6 @,@ 500 miles (10 @,@ 460 km) nonstop to Washington , D.C. , the airmen encountered unexpected headwinds over Alaska Territory and Canada , and they predicted that two of the aircraft would not have enough fuel to take them the full distance . All three B @-@ 29s landed in Chicago instead , refueled , and continued to Washington , where each crewman was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross , including the three pilots : Generals Barney M. Giles , Emmett O 'Donnell , Jr. and Curtis LeMay .

The USAAF distance record did not last long : two months later , another American aircrew flew a B @-@ 29 from Guam to Washington , D.C. a distance of 7 @,@ 916 miles (12 @,@ 740 km) , breaking the world record . Nevertheless , the Japan to Washington flight pioneered a route similar to that used by later airliners . Importantly for the airmen , America was able to demonstrate the reach of airpower in light of the nascent Cold War .

= = Preparation = =

Three B @-@ 29s based on Guam , which had spotless mission records and no mechanical difficulties , were selected for the mission . In a ten @-@ day process that continued as a typhoon raged off Okinawa , the aircraft were stripped of unnecessary equipment such as armor and gun turrets , and the resulting empty spaces in the fuselage were faired over with smooth metal to minimize parasitic drag . Blister @-@ type bubble windows were replaced with flat ones , painted group markings were removed , and the aluminum aircraft skin polished to a high luster , all in order to achieve the least possible drag . Twentieth Air Force markings were painted on each vertical rudder . The bomb bay in each aircraft was fitted with five 600 @-@ gallon (2 @,@ 300 L) fuel tanks ; added to the normal B @-@ 29 fuel tanks , this made a total of 10 @,@ 000 gallons (38 @,@ 000 L) of fuel capacity , as much as a railroad tank car . Filled with fuel and 12 men , each ship weighed 144 @,@ 000 pounds (65 @,@ 300 kg) ? it would be the greatest overload attempted on a B @-@ 29 at that time .

When the aircraft were ready , they flew to Iwo Jima and stopped for the night . There they were loaded with as much fuel as they could hold . It was known that the intended air base in Hokkaid? did not have enough avgas to fill all three B @-@ 29s for the long @-@ distance flight , meaning that at Hokkaid? they could only top off the fuel tanks to make up for the amount used to fly from Iwo Jima . On September 15 , the three aircraft left Iwo Jima , flying north past Okinawa , where the typhoon had blown itself out . They continued to Hokkaid? where the approach involved some apprehension . The Japanese air base had been judged by Colonel William " Butch " Blanchard as suitable for B @-@ 29s , with a runway that was long enough and was near sea level for maximum lift in the densest possible air , but it was not known whether it could hold such heavily laden bombers without the concrete cracking . LeMay sent Douglas C @-@ 54 Skymasters filled with 55 @-@ gallon (210 L) drums of avgas to Sapporo ? the crewmen would have to top off their tanks by hand .

The Japanese air base that would serve as the launching point was called Mizutani at Chitose locally , and Sapporo Air Base by the Americans . Today it is the Japan Ground Self @-@ Defense Force Camp Higashi @-@ Chitose . It was built at the southern part of Japan 's northern island Hokkaid? , near the city of Sapporo , as the base for long @-@ range flights to attack the U.S. ? one

@-@ way suicide trips made by four @-@ engine bombers ? a function that it never served . The three B @-@ 29s landed safely , and LeMay stepped from his aircraft to be greeted by approximately 30 Japanese soldiers and the base commander , who saluted for some time before realizing that LeMay had no intention of returning the salute . With that treatment setting the tone for U.S. ? Japan relations in the area , the airmen made certain to wear side arms as they walked around downtown Sapporo on the evenings of September 16 and 17 . LeMay later said that the 3 @, @ 000 Japanese sailors manning the air base were " polite " and posed no threat .

= = Aircraft and men = =

The commander of the first aircraft was Lieutenant General Barney M. Giles , Deputy Commander of the United States Strategic Air Forces in the Pacific . His aircraft carried the only weather officer making the long @-@ distance voyage . One of the crewmen was Captain Kermit Beahan , bombardier aboard Bockscar . Others included Lieutenant Bill Dolan , who served as one of the pilots .

The second aircraft 's commander was Major General Curtis LeMay , Chief of Staff of the Strategic Air Forces . First Lieutenant J. Ivan Potts served as one of the pilots , as did Lieutenant Colonel William C. Kingsbury ? the two had been a flight team in the 25th Bombardment Squadron (Very Heavy) of the 58th Bombardment Wing , Very Heavy , based on Tinian , and were good friends . Colonel William H. Blanchard , Chief of Staff of the Twentieth Air Force , joined the crew at Guam after personally inspecting Sapporo Air Base a few days earlier . Others on the crew from the 25th BS included Sergeant Jerome A. School , Sergeant Richard P. Fischer and Sergeant B. T. Freeman , the latter two removed at Guam when LeMay and Blanchard joined . Two men were from the 44th Bomber Squadron : First Lieutenant John C. Eiland and Staff Sergeant Frank Klas Jr . The remainder of the crew was Flight Engineer Captain William W. Townes (45th Bomber Squadron) , First Lieutenant Stephen T. Jones (24th Bomber Squadron) , Major John F. Wedding (468th Bomb Group) and Captain Theodore R. Finder (40th Bomb Group Headquarters) . The crew chief was Master Sergeant Henry J. Rutowski .

Number 2 was construction number 44 @-@ 70015 , a B @-@ 29 @-@ 75 built five months earlier in Wichita , Kansas , as part of the so @-@ called Battle of Kansas ? the push to produce great air fleets of B @-@ 29s . Number 2 , dubbed Marianna Belle by its combat crew , made the cut because it did not consume more than the normal amount of fuel and oil in carrying out its missions , which were marked by top mechanical reliability .

Number 3 was commanded by Brigadier General Emmett O 'Donnell , Jr. who was ending his service as commander of the 73d Bombardment Wing , Very Heavy .

= = Flight = =

The airmen drew up a " great circle " (shortest distance on the surface of a globe) flight plan that used the jet stream as a tailwind to help them get farther with less fuel , though the tailwind was not absolutely required . The plan was for each aircraft to make its own way over the Kamchatka Peninsula at the eastern edge of the Soviet Union , then over the Bering Sea to Nome , Alaska , and continue over Fairbanks , over the Canadian Rockies and much of Canada , over the Great Lakes , then on to Washington , D.C. near the Atlantic coast ? a total of 6 @, @ 762 miles (10 @, @ 882 km) taking 26 hours in the air . This distance would not have broken the world 's distance record then held by two Royal Air Force Vickers Wellesley aircraft that had flown from Ismaïlia , Egypt , to Darwin , Australia , in 1938 , covering 7 @, @ 162 miles (11 @, @ 526 km) , but it was considered a good public relations stunt , good for the USAAF and the generals ' images .

On September 18 , the airmen woke up very early to make final preparations . A weather observation aircraft took off an hour before the first B @-@ 29 to report the latest meteorological conditions along the path ahead . Dumbo and Super Dumbo aircraft (B @-@ 17s and B @-@ 29s rigged for air @-@ sea rescue) stood by , on alert . With the airfield lit by truck headlamps , Number 1 commanded by Giles was first to take off , a little after 6 : 00 local time , as dawn began to glow in

the east . Next , LeMay 's ship took off at 6 : 15 am , 4 : 15 pm Eastern War Time in Washington , with Lieutenant Colonel Kingsbury at the throttles and First Lieutenant Potts at the controls . O 'Donnell 's Number 3 took off a few minutes later . The heavily loaded machines required every bit of the 8 @, @ 200 @-@ foot (2 @, @ 500 m) concrete runway to get airborne ? and some of the gravel beyond ? reaching 142 miles per hour (229 km / h) before lifting from the ground . All three bombers were expected to be in Washington by 5 pm the next day .

Two or three hours into the flight , the weather officer aboard Giles ' Number 1 observed slight headwinds . Giles " threatened to throw him overboard unless he did something about it . " Five hours out of Japan , the airmen in Number 2 were over Kamchatka when they were met by three Bell P @-@ 63 Kingcobra fighters wearing the red star insignia of the Soviet Air Force . The Soviet fighter pilots inspected the unarmed B @-@ 29 at close range and then performed aerobatic maneuvers for the Americans . The three dipped their wings in salute and left the Superfortress to continue its journey . After Kamchatka , LeMay and Blanchard replaced Kingsbury and Potts at the controls .

Over the Bering Sea , the three B @-@ 29s maintained radio contact with each other , communicating positions hourly as they navigated independently . Near the Arctic Circle , the magnetic compasses fluctuated wildly , and the fliers ignored them , relying instead on the radio compass . In Number 2 , the radio compass stopped working as well , but it resumed working later in the flight .

Wearing fur @-@ lined flight suits did not prevent the men from feeling the extreme cold of high altitude . Pilots rotated duty so that none would get too tired . Weather continued to be a great concern , and was frequently checked . The aircraft left the Bering Sea behind , encountering North America at Nome after about 13 hours of flight . From Nome to Fairbanks , the Northern Lights were clearly visible to the crews . Even though the B @-@ 29 pressurization systems were working , the outside air temperature of ? 25 ° F (? 32 ° C) at an altitude of about 21 @, @ 000 feet (6 @, @ 400 m) was not counteracted by the heating systems " which seemed to have completely broken down .
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= = = Weather problems = = =

At Fairbanks , the three B @-@ 29s encountered significant headwinds ; more than the " slight " headwinds observed up to this time . They had expected tailwinds from the jet stream , yet could complete the distance without them , but headwinds meant that Washington might be too far . At 7 am Eastern War Time , aircraft Number 2 was over Northway , Alaska , and navigator Bill Townes determined that they were behind schedule . He said later , " When I reported that fact to General LeMay , he looked at me as if he thought it was my fault , so I retreated behind my bulkhead to check my figures . " Later , the airmen learned that the typhoon near Okinawa the week before had greatly affected the jet stream .

Seventeen hours after lifting off at sunrise in Japan , the men began to see the sun rise again over the Yukon ? it was a very short day for them , and none had been able to sleep for the excitement of the trip , the stimulant benzedrine , and the penetrating cold . Crossing into Canada , the headwinds grew stronger still , and a load of hard rime ice and clear ice was visible on the wings . Though the B @-@ 29s had been delivered to the war front complete with deicing equipment , such gear had been removed months before to reduce weight and therefore increase combat range and speed . The ice load picked up in the night would have to be endured until it melted off at lower altitudes .

Near Regina , Saskatchewan , the fliers made their first decision regarding early stops for fuel . One proposed solution was for Giles to land in Minneapolis , O 'Donnell to land in Detroit , and LeMay (who had enough fuel) to continue as before to Washington . Giles radioed this plan to the War Department : " Have been bucking headwinds for past nine hours . Predicted plans for Fairbanks to States did not materialize . Giles and O 'Donnell plan to land at Minneapolis and Detroit due to fuel . Plane Number Two , commanded by LeMay , believes he is able to get to Washington . " However , soon after this , Giles determined that Chicago Municipal Airport was the only airport large enough to accommodate the B @-@ 29s ; he directed O 'Donnell to land there with him . LeMay sent word

by radio to the War Department that he was heading for Washington . In New York , newspapers put this plan in headlines : " Two B @-@ 29s will land to refuel as third roars on to Capitol " .

All three aircraft approached Chicago , and LeMay contacted the War Department again by radio . O 'Donnell landed at 5 : 43 pm Eastern War Time , with Giles about 45 minutes behind . Just past Chicago LeMay was informed by the War Department that weather was " marginal " in Washington and that he was now ordered to refuel in Chicago . Giles landed at 6 : 30 and LeMay at 6 : 43 pm . LeMay 's elapsed flight time was 27 hours and 28 minutes . The straight @-@ line distance they had flown over the globe was about 5 @,@ 840 miles (9 @,@ 400 km) .

While the aircraft were refueled , newspaper reporters asked questions of Giles and of Captain Kermit Beahan , who as bombardier aboard Bockscar , visually targeted Nagasaki in order to drop the second atomic bomb . The other crewmen drank coffee and waited . When refueling was completed , they took off directly for Washington .

= = Reception = =

From Chicago to Washington , D.C. the flight was uneventful . The " silvery sky giants , manned by their blue ribbon crews " flew over National Airport (now Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport) in formation at 9 : 30 pm and landed . The generals and crews stepped from their aircraft , LeMay waiting until he was smoking one of his signature cigars . Along with senior USAAF staff and reporters , wives and family were at the airport to greet the airmen , as well as a crowd of onlookers . Photographs were taken at the airport , then the airmen were whisked off to the Statler Hotel , now the Capital Hilton . In the lobby , the weary , grimy and stubble @-@ bearded men were besieged for autographs . Some of them stayed up later to hear supper @-@ club singer Hildegard in the grand showroom , others went to bed to catch up on sleep .

The next morning , a news conference was held in the grand showroom . Giles emphasized the importance of the route as an indication of the future , both for civil and military aircraft . He warned : " Now that we have proved that we can do it , we must now remember that any future enemy will also be able to do it " . LeMay declared that he wanted a second chance to prove that the B @-@ 29 was capable of flying 6 @,@ 500 miles nonstop . He said , " When we took off at Hokkaido we had a little headwind and expected it . However , all our information indicated that once we passed Fairbanks it would drop . We didn 't need a tailwind . All we needed was a nice normal wind to arrive on schedule . The buffeting headwind averaged 70 mph " (110 km / h) . After the reporters were finished , Giles presented all the airmen with the Distinguished Flying Cross . Giles told the men that each one could keep his personal military equipment as a memento of the flight , including parachutes . They were offered free rides home on military aircraft . Potts refused the parachute and the ride , telling Giles , " Thank you , general , I think I 'll take the train ! " .

Other B @-@ 29 crewmen still in the Pacific Ocean theatre of World War II did not pay much attention to the record @-@ breaking flight . Harry Changnon of the 40th Bomb Group on Tinian said " most of us in the 40th knew little about the trip in September 1945 as we were busy preparing to fly our 45 B @-@ 29s home in October " . Two months later on November 19 ? 20 , Colonel Clarence S. Irvine and Lieutenant Colonel G. R. Stanley flew a long @-@ distance testbed B @-@ 29 named Pacusan Dreamboat to a world 's distance record of 7 @,@ 916 miles (12 @,@ 740 km) flying nonstop and unrefueled from Guam to Washington , D.C. , taking 35 hours and 5 minutes . Their aircraft 's gross weight was greater , at 155 @,@ 000 pounds (70 @,@ 000 kg) .