

WARTIME LETTER FROM
CAPT. ROBERT P. O'R FORTUNE

No. 9

May 25, 1945

My Dearest Mom and Dad,

It's been so long since I have written, but you can see by the papers how busy we have been. I hope Catie has kept you up to date. I'm so thrilled about Cay and everything. Thanks loads for taking care of the flowers etc., and for the very prompt wire. Just one day to get here. You don't know how that relieved me--very well stated wire.

You get most of my daily chatter from Catie. What I wanted to do in this letter was to write in as full an account as censorship will allow of a typical mission. All the daily chores that we go through that are routine to me, but may be of some interest to you. I picked our 17th mission before I took off, as I said I would try to remember everything about it so that I could write a full account for you. However, as it happened #17 was not typical, it was our roughest mission to date. However, here goes--Target Tokyo.

As I had written Catie, the weather had been bad for several days over the Empire; so we were held on the ground. For three days we knew what our target would be, for three days we sweated it out--waiting for the latest weather reports--only to find out that the mission had been postponed for 24 more hours. We knew this was the beginning of the end for Tokyo as a city. So I had our ship pulled out for a damned good inspection--she was in tip-top shape, ready to go.

We went to Target Study at 10 A.M. That is a class covering our target, what it looks like, visual references on the ground, how we are to use our "precision instruments" to hit the target. On these incendiary missions, we have to use means of bombing other than visual because the target is always obscured by smoke, fire, and a big black thermal--extending up thousands of feet. The later you go in, the higher and more dangerous the thermal.

Then after our study, we ate, hit the sack for a couple of hours. Then briefing was at 2:30 P.M. We all piled in the briefing hall--so many crews were going, this being a maximum effort mission, that our gunners had to be briefed in a different place. The C.O. gave a little talk, first, about how important this mission was to our effort, etc. Then the operations officer gave us our route up (almost stereotyped now), route from landfall, I.P. (Initial point) to the target, and then the breakaway. The

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overall picture showed for almost 600 B-29's to be over the target in 70 minutes--that meant about 10 B-29's per minute. You can imagine how we felt about that. The fear of collision with other blacked out ships. Anyway we were working on the percentage basis. Our squadron was low squadron of the group, which was the low group in the wing, and the wing was the low wing of the bomber command (the 20th Air Force). In other words we were the lowest men on the totem pole. We had to be worried about search lights, and flak picking us up first, also collision with other ships, and the bombs falling from other ships above us. It had worked before, and, we hoped, it would work again. Anyway briefing went on--small points were cleared up. Time of take off--target time, etc were covered--you see time is of prime importance, after traveling 1800 miles you have to be there within a few minutes of your appointed time. We found out that instead of a day take off, we would go off at night.

We had some extra time that we hadn't expected; so we got another meal, and hit the sack again for a couple of hours. Then we jumped into our trucks to go to the line (which was only 8 miles away). We were dressed in our uniforms (summer khakis--very dirty), dog tags, G.I. shoes, my three lucky pieces--my silver dollar, a sock from Tinian that I've had on every mission (so that it can be returned to same) and also a horseshoe nail that was given to me by a "Doc" here as a substitute for the "purple shaft" (that's Army slang for a "rooking"). Also a St. Christopher medal. We wear our uniforms in case of capture, and we can't carry pictures or letters for the same reason.

Well, then we went to get all our flying equipment--Mae West, C-1 life vest--(containing emergency water, fishing equipment, first aid kit, hat, harpoon, toilet paper, signal mirror, knife, etc--we wear it just like a vest) then our heavy flying jacket, parachute, flashlight, sun glasses, and canteen. We don't carry our .45's anymore because, we figure that would antagonize the Japs in case of capture. Our one man dinghies and flak suits and flak helmets were already in the ship. Oh yes, our oxygen mask and helmet too, although we don't go over high enough to use these anymore.

All was in readiness. I inspected our ship--she looked fine--clean as a whistle. Then I inspected the crew and their equipment, we loaded up the ship started engines, and taxied out. Just then a ship blew up on take off, but we were flagged off on a runway adjacent to it, and as I lifted that heavy ship off the ground we hit a prop wash from the ship ahead of us--there we were, fighting her just 50 feet off the water--then we got her

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under control, and climbed.

First we smelled gas fumes--dangerous--but had to keep going. We found it to be gas coming out of an overloaded gas tank--we just prayed that we wouldn't get a short in our electrical system to start a fire. Anyway, we leveled off, and the fumes subsided. Then we were on course for Japan. I set up the automatic pilot, and seeing that everything was OK, I crawled out of seat to get some sack time. "Horse" always watches going up, and, then I fly her over the target and then home. We do that so that I will be fresh over the target, and in the event of trouble, I can try to bring her back.

We had a beautiful full moon up, and the weather was perfect. It was a gorgeous sight. Everything ran smoothly. We were 3 minutes early going by Iwo, and we were saving gas from that which was briefed.

We got up to our landfall point on Japan--just at the right time, turned to go to the I.P., we passed by Mt. Fujiyama which looked serene in the bright moonlight--we could look up at it; so you know we weren't too high. We could see Tokyo burning from 150 miles away. As we approached the I.P., we didn't see any opposition in the way of searchlights or flak over Tokyo way, but that is worse, because that means it is the calm before the storm. Then all of a sudden, searchlights flashed on at the I.P. They picked us up after waving around for a few seconds. Then as we were lit up, other searchlight batteries vectored on us. We turned on the bomb run--40 miles to go to Tokyo--and we were bathed in the lights. I pulled my yellow goggles down over my eyes so I would not be blinded--you could have read a newspaper inside the cockpit. We lost the original searchlight batteries, but others would pick us up and we could do nothing but run the gauntlet. Then flak started--very heavy--we could hear it bursting around us--see the flashes--luckily we were not hit. We were making a beautiful run, in spite of all the opposition--still in the searchlights--we had been in them for about four minutes--which is an eternity. Then our bomb doors came open--we were right on the target. "Bombs Away"! and just then all hell broke lose (sic)--the gunners called out fighters--so fast and loud that no one could understand anything--then there was an explosion--one of our gunners was hit--but I went into violent evasive action--and just missed the thermal over the target, and lost the fighters at the same time--six fighters had hit us simultaneously. The co-pilot yelled out that the controls were shot away--his were, mine were all right. So we headed for the coast climbing--we couldn't pressurize because of the bullet holes--so I

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leveled her off about 13,000 ft and headed for home. We noticed gas coming out of No. 4 engine--we couldn't do anything about it except pray to God that it didn't catch on fire, and that there was enough gas to run the engine for a while longer until we could escape from the mainland--she held. When we were safe we feathered #4 engine, out of gas, and then took stock of our damage. The gunner was badly shot--a Jap 20 mm. explosive shell had hit and exploded in his left shoulder--barely leaving his arm there. I can't tell you the boy's name until his family is notified--a three week period. We lay him down, covered him up to keep him warm. He was numb in his left side; so he didn't hurt. He was coherent, and after his initial loss of blood, he stopped bleeding. A little later we gave him blood plasma (which is always on the plane) and he perked up quite a bit--it probably saved his life, because he didn't go into too much shock. However, we had to get him home in a hurry. With #4 engine out, the co-pilot's controls shot away, the radio equipment shot up--we still had contact on the key but that was all, and our IFF shot out we were not sitting too pretty--we kept losing altitude steadily, but we headed for Iwo. We finally got down to 2500 ft and the plane held altitude, but it was going to take a lot longer at that altitude to get anywhere. We knew then we couldn't make the base; so we sent distress messages back to base, keeping them posted every half hour as to our position. Then another blow came--we got the weather at Iwo--100 ft ceiling, 1/8 of a mile visibility. Therefore, Iwo was socked in, but we had to get in with this wounded boy aboard. No voice communication on radio at all. Well, we ran into bad headwinds and were only making 110 knots, but we finally got to Iwo 5 hours after the target (it usually takes 2 - 3 hours). She was socked in just on the island, clear all around. We circled for about 45 minutes, along with dozens of other crippled ships.

They finally called us in via the radio operator--still she was socked in, but we came on in--couldn't find the runway, and went around on three engines, then tried again--I just barely made out the edge of the runway as we came in--it was too late then--I missed the runway about 200' and racked the plane around into the runway--after we had gotten under the ceiling; we hit the ground about halfway down the runway and slapped brakes on. It so happened that there was another 29 cracked up at the end of the runway, and a batch of fighters on either side of it warming up to give our crippled 29's air cover while they circled. We knew we had to crack up, but there was just space enough for a B-29 to pass between all this mess--we made it going 90 miles an hour--and I

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kicked her around and ground-looped her. We shook and shuddered, but came to a stop. Luckily we had put all our men in crash positions before landing; so nobody was ever scratched, even the wounded boy was all right. Just luck and God made us escape running into someone, but we were all OK. They took the boy to the hospital, and I saw the Doc later, and he said he would live and probably keep his arm, but his fighting days were over!!

I know you think that must be enough, but there is still more. They asked us if we would ferry back a plane that had been left up there by another crew; we said OK. It was in horrible shape, but if she flew that's all we cared about. After several hours of trying to get her fixed up enough to even get off the ground, we finally tried it. It was still "socked in" so we made an instrument take off, and just after we got off our turbo amplifiers caught on fire, and smoke filled the cockpit. We got that out and found out that all our radios had burned up, Turbo was out, no compasses except the magnetic, all our secret navigation devices were burned out--all we had left were the engines; so we just headed her home and prayed to God that nothing else would happen--so that we would have had to ditch, as we could never let anyone know where we were--and Iwo was still "closed". Anyway, we finally limped home, and only after we parked the plane and had the engines cut could we call mission #17 complete. The mission took 16 hours of flying time and 10 years of our lives.

No, #17 was not a typical mission, it was damned rough, but it was the one I was going to describe to you. We found we had lost two crews out of the 24th (no one you knew) and had five ships out of the squadron shot up. No names can be given. We just had a rough trip--the whole squadron was "used". What is left is going back to Tokyo again tonight. However, other outfits did not catch the hell we did. We have been recommended for rest leave in Hawaii, but transportation is a problem.

Don't worry. I love you all so much and I'll be seeing you. Keep praying--I'm sure that is what brought us through!

All my Love,

Pete

P.S. I know it!! Do you?? [note: each letter ended with this P.S.]