

WWII airman recalls mission to Hiroshima, Nagasaki



Patrick Dennis/The Advocate

Stan Shaw tells a story about his World War II experiences in the Pacific, where he was a B-29 co-pilot on bombing missions over Japan.



PATRICK DENNIS/THE ADVOCATE

Stan Shaw holds a photo of him that was taken in the co-pilot's seat of a B-29 during World War II.

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- Published: Mar 5, 2009 - Page: 1E

On Aug. 7, 1945, Stan Shaw was like any other airman on a combat mission — prepared, yet wondering what to expect. Certainly, Shaw didn't expect what he saw when his bomber arrived at its primary target.

For all practical purposes, it wasn't there, replaced by a rust-colored stain — Hiroshima, Japan, a day after the first atomic bomb attack.

By the time President Harry Truman announced to the world on Aug. 6 that warfare had entered the atomic age, it already was the next day in Guam. That was where Shaw — Shawinski at the time; he later changed his name — was a co-pilot with the 315th Bomb Wing, 501st Bomb Group, 20th Air Force. He was part of an air armada that was attacking Japan with the American military's largest bomber, the B-29 Superfortress, from bases on Pacific islands.

It was from Tinian in the Northern Marianas that Col. Paul W. Tibbets took off on Aug. 6 in a B-29 named "Enola Gay" and dropped an atomic bomb code named "Little Boy" on Hiroshima at 8:15 a.m. local time. It exploded 1,900 feet over the city, with the blast killing an estimated 70,000, with thousands of others dying later from injuries and radiation poisoning. The explosion, equivalent to roughly 15 tons of TNT, destroyed much of the city and ignited a firestorm that spread the devastation.

Shaw knew Tibbets, who had been on Guam, but not what had happened.

"We didn't know anything about an atomic bomb," Shaw said.

It is unclear if any of those in Shaw's squadron who got up early for the 18-hour mission on Aug. 7 — or even those who sent them — had a hint of what they would find when they reached their primary target.

As they neared Hiroshima, Shaw looked down from his B-29, named "Jus One Mo Time," on an utterly devastated city and reported that to the pilot, Lt. Vincent Bebe.

"I said, 'Bebe, we don't need to drop our bombs here. Look down there. Everything's rusty.' We were around 20,000 feet. ... Take a good look. It's all rusty. We've got good bombs. We don't want to drop them here,' " Shaw said. "He said OK."

So, they flew on to their alternate target — Nagasaki, which would receive history's second and last atomic bomb attack on Aug. 9.

On this day, the Nagasaki target was an oil refinery, but the bombardier missed it by a half-mile. The B-29 landed at Iwo Jima, then returned to Guam the next day.

Despite the damage caused by the two bombs, and the Soviet Union's declaration of war against Japan on Aug. 9, the Japanese did not surrender until Aug. 14, so the bombing continued. One mission was a 24-hour round-trip attack on oil refineries at Akita in northern Japan. The enemy air force had been so decimated that Shaw never saw Japanese fighter planes, but plenty of anti-aircraft fire.

“I saw flak,” he said. “One time when we went over another target, we had so damn much shooting in front of us we could have put our wheels down and landed. But I never got scared.”

Having spent much of his life in the air may have contributed to that. Growing up in southwestern Pennsylvania, Shaw saved money from his newspaper route to start flying lessons when he was 13 years old. He was an experienced pilot when he joined the Army in 1942 and requested to be in Air Transport, but was assigned to ground duties until an officer at Fairfield Air Base in Kansas City noticed his background.

“He said, ‘Hey, Ski — most people called me Ski — you’ve got a pilot’s license. Why in the hell aren’t you flying?’” Shaw said. “I said, ‘Captain, this is where they put me, and I didn’t want to make any trouble.’ ”

Shaw spent the rest of his military career as an airman, becoming a test pilot for B-29s after the war. On his way back to the United States, he befriended Nate Caffey of LSU’s English Department, who suggested he come to LSU to study. Shaw took him up on the offer and met his wife, Inez, there. He earned master’s and doctoral degrees and eventually worked for the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality’s radiation protection division. Now retired, the Shaws live in Baton Rouge.