



Kenneth T. Crothers

*U.S. Army Air Force
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Ken Crothers had a most unusual specialty in the armed service. He maintained and serviced power-operated gun turrets and automatic-computing gun sights. His work is too complicated for the layman to understand, but his commentary on the war in the Pacific as he traveled from Hawaii to Okinawa is the stuff of this interview.

When asked to explain his work in terms that I could understand, he said, "I fixed them, they broke them, I fixed them again." He got into this very specialized, very complicated field, when he failed the cadet pilot's eye exam and decided, "If I can't fly them, I'll fix them."

After a short stint as a trainee at an insurance company, I decided that I should do my part for the war effort. I enlisted in November 1942 in the Army Air Force. Even though I was turned down for cadet school, I still enlisted so that I could choose my branch of service. I went to basic training at Atlantic City, New Jersey, and then to Lowry Field, Colorado, to learn the business of gun turrets and gun sights.

After extensive training, I was sent to Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, where we boarded a ship for Honolulu, Hawaii. In November 1943 we went to the little island of Funafuti [capital of the Ellice Islands, now Tuvalu], which had one airstrip, where I began my work with the 42nd squadron of the 11th Bomb Group. We had four squadrons of 12 planes each. I was responsible for our 12 planes.

While I was there, we had two air raids in which we lost a number of planes. Fortunately, I was in my foxhole when a bomb exploded near me — my first welcome to the real world of war. Our B24 bombers often flew 12- to 14-hour missions to Japanese-occupied Wake Island, and the Marshall and Gilbert Islands. They had to fly unescorted because no fighter planes could stay up that long. When our planes came back damaged from a mission, we had to repair them immediately, since we had no spare planes.

To give you an idea of the size of our 7th Air Force, another Air Force in the Pacific could put up to 1,000 planes in the air, while we in the 7th could only put up 60 to 70. The first invasion from Funafuti was to Tarawa [one of the Gilbert Islands], where the Marines took an awful beating. Our job was to soften them up before the invasion, so we bombed them and bombed them, but the Japanese were so well dug in that it was a real bloody battle for the Marines in the central Pacific.

The next island to take was Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands. From there [the U.S. went] to the Marianas to retake Guam, Saipan, and Tinian. And from there to Okinawa to bomb Japan and China. It is important to note that the 42nd squadron lost half of its planes on the ground or on missions,

so we went back to Hawaii to re-equip while the other three squadrons went to the Marshalls. We rejoined them at Guam.

The Japanese air force had suffered great losses at the Battle of the Coral Sea, Midway, and at the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot.

[Because of the importance of what was called the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot, an explanation is in order. The Japanese decided that they had to go on the offensive on the sea. On June 19, 1944, the Battle of the Philippine Sea began. It was the largest aircraft carrier battle in history. The Japanese lost three carriers and 600 planes, land-based and carrier-based — thus the name Turkey Shoot, the carriers and experienced pilots were irreplaceable and their loss hastened Japan's downfall.]

When we were at Funafuti, they could bomb us from Tarawa, but when they lost that island, they had very little striking power until we got to Guam. All across the central Pacific, they had fighter planes to intercept our planes, but it wasn't until we got to Guam that their bombers were again used.

Okinawa is infamous for the mass suicides of civilians, who were told that the Americans would rape and pillage the population, and for the ferocity of the kamikaze attacks on American ships. Were you witness to that?

Fortunately we were not. The Navy really took a battering from the kamikaze attacks. Those stories began back in Saipan, where mothers and children were jumping off of cliffs. We got to Okinawa in July, 1945, and the day after we arrived, we began bombing Kyushu, the southernmost major island of Japan, while the B29s were going up to Tokyo. We also began bombing mainland China, where there were two Japanese air bases near Shanghai.

The 5th, 13th, and 7th Air Force were now all on Okinawa and so instead of a 50-plane mission, we could send 200 or 300. I remember standing on the air strip one day watching 100 B24s in the air. In the past, our group could only send a maximum of 30 planes.

Were you responsible for all these planes on Okinawa and did you have sufficient supplies to keep these planes in the air?

I was just responsible for my 12 planes. I had my own trailer where I worked on the gun sights for the last three months of the war. When a plane was disabled beyond repair, it was taken off the runway and rechristened "Miss Tech Supply."

When we were looking for a part that wasn't in our stock, we would cannibalize the disabled planes. Most of our losses of planes were back at Funafuti. When we got to Guam, our bombers had P51 fighter escorts on missions, so our losses were reduced. When the U.S. took Iwo Jima, it provided an airfield closer to Japan than Saipan for emergency landings. It was estimated that [that] saved 20,000 lives.

From what island did the planes carrying the atom bombs fly?

They flew from Tinian. We were delighted when we heard about the A bombs, because we had a saying, "Golden Gate in

'48." That's when we thought we would be coming home. Some, who disparaged the use of the bombs, said that we would have 50,000 casualties in the invasion of Japan. I say we would have had 50,000 casualties in the first two hours. I think we would have had one million casualties-fighting men, women, and children.

They had hundreds of kamikaze boats and thousands of kamikaze planes. The GIs on Okinawa who would have had to be in the invasion were delighted. The celebration on Okinawa was bedlam with everyone shooting their weapons. I hid in my foxhole to keep from being killed by my own people.

We stayed so long on Okinawa after the war ended that we opened the University of Southern Okinawa to teach classes and keep everyone busy. We had two typhoons on Okinawa after the war. A destroyer turned over, we lost our mess hall and our tent to winds that exceeded 120 mph.

Everyone was so disgusted waiting to go home that some started a mutiny. We found a ship captain who would take us back to San Francisco. We were warned that we would be AWOL and would have to cross without a doctor aboard. Fortunately cooler heads prevailed and the mutiny died. Eventually, of course, we did go home and I was discharged at Camp Atterbury, Indiana. ©