“Rendezvous with Destiny”

The narrative “Rendezvous with Destiny” is based on true events that were actually lived by real life everyday people just like you. Their names have been changed to protect their true identities and that of their families. Some experiences may have been embellished to help develop the story line and peak the readers’ interest; while others may have been desensitized to protect the memories and memoirs of the real life persons. This chronicle is not meant to be a history lesson; however, it does include numerous historical facts to set the proper background for our chosen time frame of 1920 through 1946.

Rendezvous 33-45n with 136-25e Destiny

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Forward

Three young men the sagas main individuals, near the age of twenty, chosen at random could have come from any of the original forty-eight states. Their ethnicity is of little concern because they represent America, its countless backgrounds, its many cultures, and customs as well as the American way of life. They exemplify the ideals, the freedoms and rights that we as free persons enjoy and have come to expect in our daily lives. They also represent the fortitude of America and are willing to fight for the values America symbolizes.

Our three key individuals emanated from the pool of twenty-six million young males that were living in 1920-1930’s America; each grew up in the aftermath of the Great War which ended in 1918 when Germany surrendered. After that war our country (and others) withdrew into a period of complacency and individualism. Most political agendas were focused on the happenings inside their own nations with very little attention on events taking place throughout the world. This complacency helped to create the European events allowing Germany and its Fuhrer Adolph Hitler to expand their military capacity far beyond the limits established in the Armistice and surrender agreement of 1918 signed by Germany in Versailles, France. This agreement is often referred to as the Boxcar Agreement because it was signed in an actual railroad boxcar.

Germany’s military expansion soon reigned terror on the smaller adjacent European countries and succeeded in drawing America into the European conflict later on 12 December of 1941.

Our participants were born in the early 1920’s, a decade of change that came roaring in like a lion. It featured the new Jazz musical styles, the speak easies and the return of WW1 service men to their families, friends and jobs. Newly developed radio and telephone systems led to improved communication. Talking motion pictures were being developed. The rapid availability of automobiles created a need for hard surface roads to meet this new challenge. Aviation grew and with it came a new and faster form of transportation creating the illusion the world had shrunk. Economic prosperity and carefree lifestyles were also on the rise.

However, the American home front was being threatened by little men with big names; mobsters and racketeers like Capone, Dillinger and many others. The public portrayed them as heroes rather than the hoodlums they really were. It was also a time of corrupt officials taking advantage of their position and the fragile judicial system. For organized crime it was the perfect time for expansion and growth and thus continued to do so. In the meantime, America’s women were pressing for the right to vote; and working hard to prevent the manufacture, sale and consummation of alcoholic beverages.
Herbert Hoover was elected in 1929 as the 31st President of the United States. However he was unable to stave off the stock market crash which plunged the nation into the great depression; and with it the numerous large failures in our banking system. These failures contributed to an inflated fourteen percent unemployment which later grew to twenty-five percent. The loss of jobs, wages, investments and savings brought with it terms that we as Americans were not familiar with, like hunger, soup kitchens, the poor house and Hooverville’s (shanty towns, cardboard box communities and tent villages across America). The terrible conditions in the nation spawned a cry for new national leadership.

In 1933 Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the newly elected Democratic president, brought forth the “New Deal” plan, instituted the “Civilian Conservation Corp. (CCC)” and the “Works Progress Administration (WPA)” to help solve the severe economic problems of that time. Roosevelt’s ideas greatly improved the depression and monetary conditions in the late 1930’s.

The personal hardships and fiscal conditions described above were prevalent throughout the country and not just in larger metropolitan cities.

Yes the 1920’s began with a roar and the 1930’s went out with a crash. To paraphrase Charles Dickens “it could be said those years were the best of times and sometimes it was the worst of times.” Our three individuals were born in the small communities of Steubenville, Ohio, Lebanon, Kansas and Vacaville, California. These cities served as frameworks for the early years of their lives. From here they began their perilous journey via separate routes to their “Rendezvous with Destiny”.

**Nearing Christmas Time in Hawaii**

Saturday night the 6th day of December of 1941 was a festive occasion in Pearl Harbor. There were thousands of young U.S. Navy sailors on shore leave in and around Honolulu, Hawaii. Most were prepared to party after being at sea for three months or more. In spite of the eighty degree temperature the sailors were in a festive mood and looking for a good time. With nearly thirty large naval ships moored close by at Pearl Harbors Naval base it’s a wonder the crowd wasn’t larger. The anchored ships were being cared for by skeleton crews which permitted shore liberty to additional crew members.

Local hotels including the Royal Hawaiian and the American House were booked solid. Restaurants and bars typical of the Garden Grill, Clark’s restaurant, Art’s Place and the Belgrade Gardens were fully occupied. It appeared everyone on the island was out for an evening of fun and adventure. The old saying, “No one can party like a sailor” seemed to explain it all.
None of these sailors or their assigned chain of command were even slightly aware that while they were dancing drinking, partying and enjoying the week-end, a Japanese Imperial Navy flotilla under the command of Vice Admiral Nagumo and Admiral Yamamoto, was secretly sailing toward Pearl Harbor for the purpose of decimating the United States Navy and their capability to defend America.

Yamamoto had been planning this attack mission for almost a year before the order to execute was finally given. His armada of over forty ships, including six aircraft carriers had silently slipped away from their Japanese launching point on 26 November 1941 for their 3700 mile trip to Pearl. Their route had been carefully chosen to avoid normal shipping lanes and elude possible discovery. Yamamoto had hoped to find eighty percent of the U.S. Pacific Fleet anchored like sitting ducks around Fords Island. In the very early Sunday morning hours the parties were over and many hard partying sailors had returned to the safe confines of their ships for some much needed rest.

The element of surprise was necessary if Yamamoto’s plan was to be successful. The attack was now ready to begin and the Admiral aboard his flagship the battleship Nagato somewhere two hundred miles from Pearl was in the perfect position to watch as his plan unfolded; and indeed the attack was a complete surprise to everyone except the Japanese.

The American sailors, many still inebriated and profusely hung over were awaked at 7:55 a.m. by the sounds of over three hundred Japanese aircraft attacking all the ships tied up at Pearl. The noise of explosions echoing from the harbor surrounding Fords Island was tremendous as the planes were strafing and torpedoing the defenseless targets. The sounds of the USS Oklahoma as it exploded and capsized within its moorings reverberated throughout the hills surrounding the island.

Meanwhile the Japanese planes continued bombing and strafing the airfields intending to destroy and cripple any defensive response. Five miniature submarines had also slipped into the harbor and were wreaking havoc on the Pacific Fleets eight battleships moored at Pearl, four of which were sunk while the others experienced severe damage.

Yamamoto’s attack planes returned to their carriers for refueling and rearming then returned for a second attack of the defenseless harbor. At 9:45 a.m., one hour and fifty minutes after the initial attack began the attackers sailed away leaving their pillages of war behind.

An early assessment of the damage revealed 2400 American sailors killed in action and another 1200 wounded. Nearly all of the Pacific Fleet ships were sunk or severely damaged in addition to 188 aircraft destroyed. The Pacific Fleets losses luckily did not include three aircraft carriers that were on assignment. The loss of these three additional carriers would have severely reduced America’s ability to fight back.
On the 8th of December, President Franklin Roosevelt gave a speech denouncing the treachery of the Japanese Emperor and their military leaders. The events motivated our Congress to immediately declare war on Japan. Three days later Germany and Hitler declared war on America resulting in the U.S. declaration of war on Germany and its ally Italy.

The United States had been stunned, humiliated and dishonored by the Japanese secret attack. In addition we had been hurt, damaged and awakened, but we were not defeated. Our President Franklin D. Roosevelt said “No matter how long it takes us to overcome this planned invasion the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute Victory.”

Surprisingly enough Admiral Yamamoto made a similar comment from the deck of his ship as his taskforce sailed away from Pearl Harbor. His words, “I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve” would ring true for all to hear.

Having almost decimated the American Navy, Admiral Yamamoto’s no longer silent armada steamed away from the still smoking Pearl Harbor. Yamamoto was now ready to implement the next phase of his plan which was to secure island bases for his war efforts between Japan and America. On his homeward trip to Japan he continued to occupy needed bases in the Pacific from which to launch additional attacks, stockpile ammunition, stores, and fuel as well as stations for the fighting men necessary to defend these bases. He accomplished this by invading and conquering various islands and territories that were to be Japan’s stepping stones to the United States. These places included the Wake Islands, Guam, Midway, Okinawa, Iwo Jima, Tarawa Atoll, the Marshall Islands and the Marinas most of which were territories of America and its allies. The conquest of these small but strategic island locations not only served as strongholds and launch points for Japanese attacks and defenses; they also denied the United States the ability to attack Japanese positions from near-by offensive locations. America’s military might was still 3400 miles from Japan with all of the potential offensive bases and strategic locations under full Japanese control.

**Steubenville, Ohio, 155 years earlier**

In 1786 a group of surveyors was tasked with surveying Ohio and the North West territory. To help accomplish this mission about 150 soldiers from the Ohio 1st Regimental group was dispatched to build the surveyors a safe haven called “Fort Reuben”. The Fort served two objectives; first it provided protection for the surveyors against the Indian population and helped to prevent illegals from setting up residency in Ohio.

Fort Reuben served its purpose until 1790 when it was destroyed by fire. In its aftermath a small community known as Steubenville sprouted up from the shanty’s, the crude shacks and
tents that had supported the Fort before the fire. Thus Steubenville sometimes called the “City of Murals “was born and later designated the county seat of Jefferson County, Ohio.

The 28,000 people living in Steubenville during the 1920’s were predominately white and nearly twenty-four percent of them were of the Catholic faith.

One of those Catholic families was that of Leonard and Edith Blackmore. Leonard worked every day in the local steel mills fronting the Ohio River. His work days as a boilermaker were long, hot and tiring, leaving precious little time for personal leisure or pleasures. His wife Edith having completed her numerous daily housekeeping chores would spend several hours each day doing sewing and tailoring of clothing for her neighbors. The few pennies she earned helped the family maintain a small and improved standard of living. Edith’s sewing schedule changed somewhat in August of 1922 after she gave birth to their only child, a boy whom they named Ronald.

During his infant years Ronald was ill frequently and made many trips to the local doctors. Some believed the steel mills had contaminated the Steubenville air supply and was the underlying cause of Ronald’s illness. The Blackmore’s decided to relocate hoping to find improvement for their son’s health.

Leonard had many skills and soon found employment as a machinist in Rochester, NY. They resided in a very nice but small home on Penhurst Street; where as time passed Ronald’s health greatly improved. The family’s income was a little less than the mills at Steubenville, but Ronald’s good health more than compensated for the slight monetary difference.

As Ronald grew up he was smaller in stature than many of his friends. But he made up for his size difference with his can do attitude and tenacity. He made the school football team because of his never quit persistence. Even the seniors on the team respected his resolve.

Ron as he was sometimes dubbed made it through school in the top percentile of his class. He was ready to enter the real world of employment and was determined to succeed among the big boys. But luck was not on his side. Almost immediately after he had secured a good paying job, his world and that of millions of other fine people was shattered when Pearl Harbor an American possession was attacked by the Japanese Navy. Ron conferred with his father before he enlisted in the Army, but he had already decided his course of action. He was pleased knowing he was supported by his dad. Ron Blackmore was taking his first train ride as he headed to Camp Breckinridge in Kentucky to compete against the big boys while completing his military basic training.
Lebanon, Kansas 65 years earlier

The geographical center of the contiguous forty-eight states of America is commemorated by a small plaque located 2.6 miles west of the center of Lebanon, Kansas. It should also identify that location as the end of the Great Western Cattle Trail coming north 350 miles from Oklahoma to Lebanon. Knowledgeable people have stated that over 1,500 cattle drives pushed nearly six million cattle and one million horses along the Great Western Trail which paralleled the Chisholm Trail into Kansas. From here the beef were loaded on to the railroads for transportation back east.

Some say this small town was named after another small town in Kentucky with the same name. It, like its Kentucky sister city was first settled by Lebanese immigrants around 1870. Mother Nature has not been nice to the city or its inhabitants. Its residents survived the great Grasshopper infestation of 1874 and again the following year when the newly laid grasshopper eggs hatched bringing forth a second infestation.

The farmers barely survived the 1886 great blizzard and its ten foot deep snow drifts. One farmer described the story “Of searching for his cattle in the snowy pasture. The cattle were missing and he feared the worse. Quite by accident he broke through a large snow drift and found his herd, crowded together, alive, but completely covered by the drifting snow. He was fortunate to be one of the few farmers with some good luck.”

The families and farms that survived were ravaged yearly by tornados and winter blizzards; not to mention the gigantic dusts bowls of the 1870’s and the 1930’s when nothing was immune to the blowing dust and dirt. Every home was full of dust and debris even though the doors and windows were covered and sealed with sheets, towels and anything that would plug an open crack. This anomaly lasted so long that many of the populace packed everything of value and moved, some as far away as California.

Lebanon’s 350 families in 1920 included John Dureen and his wife Elsie. Their eight year marriage had spawned two girls and an older son named Charles. According to his mother the most exciting time of Charles’s early life was his seventh birthday when he opened an unwieldy package that contained a telescope. While his sisters were playing with their dolls Charles fell in love with his new present and the secrets in the heavens above. Charles was shy and introverted so the opportunity to keep to himself in solitude was welcomed.

As he grew older he bypassed sports for less athletic and physical challenges. His teachers considered him an average student in most studies but were confused with the vast knowledge and interest he displayed in physics, math and anything related to the planets and solar system.
After graduation from high school Charles hoped to attend college and pursue his new found hobby. However that dream and goal had to be put on the back burner of his life. His country had recently been viciously attacked by the Japanese Navy and now needed him. The country was flooded with posters, charts and slogans from all branches of the military service begging for men and boys to enlist and do their part. The words, “Uncle Sam Needs You” were seemingly everywhere. Who could resist, certainly not Charles Dureen, who was accompanied to the Army recruiting office by his father?

**Vacaville, California about 80 years earlier**

In the early morning darkness Sam Hamilton could see the town’s lights from Vacaville, California nearly three miles before he reached the small town. Sam had been in the saddle for a long time and his buttocks like his Mustang horse Hickory were sore and tired. They had been traveling at full gallop since evading a small party of Mikok Indians about twenty miles back. Indians and sore butts were just two of the problems Sam had become familiar with while performing his job as a pony express rider.

This morning was the twenty-third of April of 1860 and nearly 4 a.m. when Sam Hamilton galloped into the small community of Vacaville. He quickly dismounted his pony, grabbed his mail pouch and saddle bags and entered E.F. Gillespie’s Store on Merchant and Main Street. Near the hitching post stood his mount Hickory still panting hard and washed out from the hard ride that just ended. Inside Gillespie’s store, Hamilton the express rider and Gillespie the station manager were hurriedly transferring mail pouches, while outside the Pony Express station employees were busy swapping a fresh horse for Sam’s winded mount. Hickory was made to wait and cool down some before he was watered and grained.

Sam needed fresh legs for the last segment of his express mail trip from Sacramento to San Francisco. The mail pouch he carried had left St. Joseph, Missouri eight days earlier. Sam knew when he reached his final destination the mail would be almost nine days in transit. The Express advertised delivery of the mail in ten days and he will have done his part to complete that mission. Later, when in San Francisco Sam could rest for a day before he began his easterly return trip toward St. Jo.

In 1922, sixty-two years later Vacaville was still a thriving community. But Gillespie’s Store was no longer in business. In its location sat the Heritage House Café; and the Express riders don’t stop there anymore to change mounts or deliver mail. That once important service had served its purpose and ceased operations after only eighteen months. The investors behind the Pony
Express were not pleased with $90,000 dollars of revenue after spending $220,000 dollars in operating expenses.

The 1922 population of Vacaville had increased to about 1300 at that time. The 1910 migrating French family of Henri and Estella Rochette, (pronounced “Roc Ket”) contributed to that numerical increase by giving birth to three girls and finally in 1921 a son they named James. Henri was a man with many talents and had opened a little shop providing blacksmithing and general handyman jobs. James attended the local school and with the excellent tutorage of his older sisters became one of the better educated boys in the neighborhood.

During his teens James worked with his father doing whatever chore needed to be accomplished. As a boy he was lucky because his sisters always had girlfriends that wanted to meet and spend time with him. His lanky frame, charming smile, a fine crop of blonde hair plus his slight French accent made him even more popular among his feminine fans.

After mastering most of the duties at his father’s shop James sought new experiences in the community. The opening of a new onion dehydration plant in Vacaville gave him part-time employment through the summer; leaving him time to attend college in the fall. The onion plant paid good wages but the unpleasant odor of garlic and onion permeating throughout the community was a problem. Nonresidents soon began calling the city by a new name, “Onionville”.

The odor of onions also played havoc with James and his lady friends. Thank God when the Chef Boyardee Corporation decided to expand into the Vacaville community, James was soon hired and asked to travel to Tulsa, Oklahoma to attend a training school. This trip exposed James to his first aeronautical experience. He was overwhelmed with the sensation of flight to the point that he signed up to take flying lessons.

The routine of working for the Boyardee Corporation, attending college, keeping up his social life and continuing his flight lessons soon became more than time permitted. An unexpected solution came when the Japanese Navy bombed the Pearl Harbor Naval center in Hawaii. It took James only a few days to get his life in order so he could join the Army Air Corp and help defend his country.
We’re in the Army now

Three young men, their lives almost mirrored, were born, schooled and somewhat experienced in the American way of life from the early 1920’s to the early 1940’s. While preparing for Christmas in 1941 none of them could have anticipated the invasion of Pearl Harbor and how that event would change their lives and that of their families. But the young sons of these families all reacted in the same manner. They listened to their hearts and Uncle Sam and chose to enlist in the Army Air Corp.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, American’s young and old alike responded to the call of arms, while even younger men from all over the nation misleadingly enlisted wanting to do their part to right this wrong. Unknown to each other Ronald Blackmore, Charles Dureen and James Rochette signed the necessary enlistment papers in their respective home towns. It didn’t matter, rich or poor, highly educated; with or without a high school education, everyone realized America and Uncle Sam needed their help. In body, the volunteers were of different color, size, weight, build and intelligence, but in desire and determination they were are all equal. Together they accepted this challenge and put their lives on the line to demonstrate their sincerity and resolute.

These thoughts and words surely entered the minds of all recruit’s like them at their official ceremony when they raised their right hand and repeated, “I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic”; as each affirmed their allegiance to the United States of America.

The war in the Pacific against the Japanese grew while Army Air Corp. recruits Ronald Blackmore, Charles Dureen and James Rochette were completing their military basic training and attending various technical schools commiserate with their aptitude testing and assigned specialty.

Island Hopping/Leapfrogging

While our men were absorbing a portion of their training, Japan our attacker was busy taking control of most of the prime islands nestled in the Pacific Ocean waters. Gaining control of these now Japanese islands was a priority item for America’s military if we are to put pressure on Japan. In early 1942 Admiral Nimitz, Commander of the Pacific Fleet and General Douglas MacArthur, Commander of the South West Pacific forces assumed this task. Their operation “Island Hopping” concept was to capture certain key islands, one after another, until Japan was finally within range of our long range bombers. Then we would attack the Japanese homeland.
From early 1942 to 1944 our troops fought for and gave their lives on these far away small pieces of sand that seemed of little importance. As we slowly crept closer to Japan the fighting for each island became fiercer than the last. Thousands of our country’s fighting men lost their lives as we recaptured island after island on our march to Japan.

**Saipan and the Mariana’s**

In June of 1944 the Pacific Commander’s next target was the Mariana Islands including Saipan, with its large Japanese airfields and much closer proximity to Japan (1300 miles). Both America and Japan knew the importance of this prime location. Accordingly the thirty thousand Japanese troops defending Saipan had been given orders by the Emperor to defend it to the death.

During the next few weeks there was intense and ferocious fighting on the Marianas among the lava caves, at the Saipan International airport, on the climb up Mount Tapotchau and places the American’s called Purple Heart Ridge and Death Valley. The American assault had cut the Japanese supply lines leaving the Japanese fighters hungry and in desperate need of ammunition, fuel and other essentials.

On 7 July 1944 after nearly seven weeks of defiant fighting the remaining Japanese forces were ordered to execute a suicide charge on the American defenses. The charge was led by twelve Japanese soldiers carrying a large red flag; followed by over three thousand troops which initially struck the American positions. Behind these chargers came the wounded, those with crutches, armed and unarmed, most with bloody bandages plus many civilians. When the Banzai attack was over the lava covered battle ground was littered with 4,300 Japanese bodies. Nearby the American positions were strewn with the remains of almost one thousand Americans, all dead. Hardly anyone could be declared a winner.

After the banzai raids were over the island was almost void of live Japanese soldiers. Only a few civilians remained, although many chose to commit Hara-Kiri like their Commanders Admiral Nagumo and General Saito (Nagumo, gun shot in his office and Saito, Seppuku in a cave). Two geographic locations on the island were nicknamed Suicide Cliff and Banzai Cliff because of the large number of suicides by both the Japanese military and civilians. Very few survived their chosen suicidal leap from these high cliffs to the rocks and ocean below.

Many of the Japanese officers in command committed Seppuku, a ritual form of suicide used by Samurai warriors to avoid surrender. This involved the individual to shove a dagger into their stomach before the eyes of their second, who would then behead the warrior in disgrace.
However most of the officer’s deaths were attributed to stomach wounds plus a pistol shot to the head.

Included in the U.S. Navy’s taskforce at Saipan were several of the reconditioned battleships that been anchored at Pearl Harbor and severely damaged almost four years earlier. History will also reflect that the Admiral Nagumo that committed suicide (by pistol) at Saipan is the same Naval Admiral that commanded the initial Japanese attack force at Pearl Harbor in 1941. His suicide completed his circle of fate he began three years earlier at Pearl.

Admiral Yamamoto the planner of the Pearl Harbor attack was killed on 18 April 1943 almost a full year prior to Nagumo’s suicide. His death occurred when American code breakers intercepted a Japanese message saying that Yamamoto would be inspecting Japanese bases on Solomon Island. Knowing this the U.S. successfully sent a squadron of P-38 fighter aircraft to intercept and destroy Yamamoto’s plane. Only 80 people attended his funeral service in Japan. Of little note was the wounding of a private first class soldier named Lee Marvin with shrapnel in his buttocks. For this wound Marvin received the Purple Heart and a Medical Discharge. This allowed Marvin to return to the states where he later became a Hollywood movie star.

Nearly seventy thousand American troops from all branches of the services were involved in the battle for Saipan. Of this force nearly four thousand lost their lives while another eleven thousand were severely wounded. This property was considered so valuable that construction of landing strips and facilities was begun while the fight for the island was still in progress.

America was paying the price, a very high price indeed for a seemingly worthless sand bar in the western Pacific Ocean. The result was an official announcement that on 9 July 1944 Saipan was firmly under American control. The next task was to cleanup, repair and enlarge the airfields in preparation for the large influx of B-29 (Super fortress) bombers and their crews that would soon be arriving.
The B-29 Super fortress

The following excerpts were taken from the WWII, B-29 Airplane Commander Training Manual.

Early in 1939, when studies were started to determine just how to produce a bomber bigger and better than the B-17, the XB-29 came into being. Its basic design was determined in 1940. Three airplanes were built as prototypes for the actual production of the B-29, the first of these taking to the air in the fall of 1942.

Many qualities of the B-17 have been built into the B-29. The B-17 tail was one step in the development. In the early experimental stages, a B-17 was flown with dual turbos, the B-29 fin and rudder, the B-29 stabilizer and elevator, and even with the B-29 ailerons.

The B-29 is the first of the "very heavy bombers." Actually, in physical size it is not much larger than a B-17 or a B-24, but its weight and power are twice theirs and its speed is considerably greater. Loaded down with gas and oil for a long ferrying trip, it holds almost as much fuel as a railroad tank car. Under normal loads, it weighs one seventh as much as a railroad locomotive and has four times the power. It’s designed to carry heavy loads for long distances at high speeds and high altitudes.

The Army Air Corp. needed a newly designed aircraft so badly that they bought it in a non-ready status. The bomber was being built by the Boeing aircraft company and due to its Fast Paced manufacturing process it was still being updated, changed and modified as it was being
assembled. This resulted in brand new aircraft often going back to the assembly line for modification and updating.

The fast paced system was even more confusing because there were not many trained pilots or crews ready to fly this newly made weapon. It was a top priority to get this aircraft and crews airworthy and into the Pacific battle against the Japanese. This new weapon surpassed anything the Army currently had in its arsenal. The plane possessed the extended range, increased bomb load and defense armament necessary to reach the Japanese mainland about 1,500 miles from the Saipan locations.

Our three young enlistees having just completed specialized training were transferred to the newly formed 73rd Bomb Wing a B-29 Heavy Bomber Unit assigned to the Smokey Hill air base at Salina, Kansas. At Smokey Hill B-29 flight crews were also being formed and began training together as a team. First Lieutenant James Rochette was one of those chosen as a B-29 pilot, also referred to as Aircraft Commander. One of Rochette’s first duties was to participate in the selection of his flight crew, which would consist of ten members plus himself.

When the process was completed Rochette had a motley crew that he could call his own and mold them into the type of crew or team member that he envisioned. The position of Co-pilot and second in command was assigned to 2nd Lt. Belgrade while 2nd Lt. John Dureen filled in the Navigators position. The bombardier selected was 2nd Lt. Dutch Duffy from Miami, Florida. The last officer crew position was 2nd Lt. Kerchief performing the duties of Engineer. The next positions included Sgt. Lower as Radio Operator and Sgt. Liberi as the Radar Operator. The aircraft was protected by a team of three gunners supervised by Sergeant Ronald Blackmore the central fire control operator from New York. His three gunnery mates SSgt’s Hayman and Clemens completed the left and right gun assignments with SSgt Shorty Munson manning the tail gunner’s position. The tight tail gun compartment was built for a small body and Shorty at 5 feet two inches was the ideal candidate.

Of prime importance was crew discipline and job cross training. The team concept was necessary for inflight war time operations. A typical example of cross training was to familiarize other crew members with the operation of the gunnery fire control systems and emergency landing gear activation and other procedures. The planes mission could not be jeopardized because the person responsible for a task was injured or unavailable for a time. A team mate has to step up and complete the task.

Lt. Rochette was given a copy of the B-29 pilot training manual telling him that the B-29 was a teamwork airplane and that he was the captain of that team. The following excerpts from the training manual served as his bible and he followed them religiously.
“Your success in combat, and the safety of your crew and airplane, depends on how well you organize your team and how well you lead it.

You are no longer just a pilot—you hold a command post and all the responsibilities that go with it. You are flying an 11-man weapon. It is your airplane and your crew, not only when you are fighting and flying, but for the full 24 hours in every day.

Your crew is made up of specialists, everyone an expert in his line. Each one contributes his important part to the whole. Know their capabilities as well as their shortcomings. Know them as men as well as specialists. Know their background, their personalities, their individual problems, their needs for specific training.

You can’t fly the B-29 by yourself. You need the full cooperation of your crew and you can get that cooperation only if the morale of your crew is good. You can help build that morale by taking the trouble to know just a little more than usual about your crew members. Find out who they were, where they lived, what they did before the war, and what their favorite hobbies, sports, and women are—it gives a man a considerable lift to have his commanding officer say something casually now and then about the town where he lived, his family, or the work that he once did. Make a point of showing genuine interest in your men; it will pay big dividends. Make your crew members feel that they are an important part of their airplane. Make a point of letting each man take a short turn at the controls during practice missions while you or the copilot stand by on dual. Make a tour of all stations at least once during every practice flight. Talk to the men, ask them questions about their duties, try to clear up any questions they may have. Make them want to have the best team in their squadron.

As airplane commander, you are responsible for the daily welfare of your crew. See that they are properly quartered, clothed, and fed. Rochette accepted the manual as his bible and used it to his advantage as he provided guidance and leadership to his team.”
When the flight crew training school was completed in Kansas, many crews including Lt. Rochette’s were assigned to the 498th Bomb Group on Saipan as part of the Twentieth Air Force in its fight against Japan. The 498th aircraft were identified by a “T” and a square painted on the tail. This identification marking made it possible to identify individual squadrons and aircraft without radio transmission. The Units mission was the strategic bombardment of the Japanese home islands and the destruction of its war making capability.

When the crews first arrived on Saipan their manpower was spent building Quonset huts for the arriving flight crews. Their own living quarters were tents while the huts were under construction.

While the 498th unit was getting settled on Saipan the crews flew “shakedown” missions against Japanese targets on Moen Island, Iwo Jima and the Truk Islands to gain proficiency. Initially the Marianas operation was faced with high aircraft and crew losses and unsatisfactory damage estimates to the enemy. To correct this General Hap Arnold recalled General Hansell from command and replaced him with General Curtiss Lemay from India to take over the twenty first bomber command.

General Lemay was concerned about the B-29 commands failure to deal decisive damage to the Japanese war industry. Lemay concluded that many failures were caused by the effects of the jet stream, cloud cover and high altitude. He directed high-altitude, daylight attacks be phased out and replaced by low altitude raids with planes carrying incendiary bombs. His plan was to burn the Japanese cities and wreak havoc among the industrial facilities working in those cities. Other positives such as saving fuel, plus engine wear and tear could not be overlooked. The main argument against the new plan was the possibility of increased aircraft losses due to Flak damage at the lower altitude.

Oil Storage Depot, Honshu, Japan

On the island of Saipan it was very early on the morning of 10 May 1945. Lt. Rochette and his flight crew had just finished a hearty but very early full breakfast including chipped beef on toast washed down with several cups of hot coffee. Now with a full belly they were assembled in the mission briefing room along with the other sixteen B-29 crews assigned to today’s early morning bombing raid.

Today’s target was the oil storage depot at Honshu. Honshu had been bombed before but the results were not satisfactory. However, today’s results were expected to be more satisfactory to the wing commander. Earlier raids were performed at 30,000 feet which was considered
high altitude with 500 pound bombs. However the 200 mph winds from the jet stream influenced the bombs flight and direction causing them to miss their targets by sizeable distance.

Today the planes would be loaded with smaller incendiary type M69 bombs that would be dropped from under 10,000 feet. The senior commander hoped the fires started by the incendiary bombs delivered from low altitude would destroy the oil storage unit. The loss of a major oil supply depot would be a devastating blow to the Japanese military and could play a huge factor in ending the war.

All crews attending the mission briefing were listening intently as the briefing officer identified the flight routes, specific targets, plus areas with the highest concentration of flak and the safest return home routes that were also being patrolled by friendly ships or submarines. Even the location and anticipated routes of the Japanese fighter planes were included in the briefing. It seemed every conceivable mission event had been carefully identified, planned for and taken into consideration.

Lt. Rochette’s ten man crew had complete trust and confidence in their commanders flying ability but they all knew that some unplanned event could happen at any time. Preparation was always the best policy.

When the mission briefing ended the seventeen b-29 crews grabbed their gear and headed to their respective planes. Some walked while others rode depending on where their plane was parked. When they reached their planes everyone was serious-minded and professional. The time for fun and games has long past. While the pilot and copilot were performing the exterior pre-flight inspection the other crew members went to their assigned stations and performed the required inspections and operational checks of their equipment. The radios, radar and navigation systems were checked and double checked while the engineer and bombardier were busy with the equipment in their area as well.

The four gunners completed the armament checklist, however the actual firing burst would have to wait until the plane was airborne. After the pilots completed the exterior pre-flight they entered the flight deck and continued with the interior check list.

As soon as everyone had completed their assigned duties the pilot released the crew for a short break outside the plane. Some needed a cigarette, a few chatted in groups while others used the alone time to ponder the mission and quite possibly their loved ones back in the States.

Lt. Dureen the bombardier was the first to reenter the aircraft with the others following closely in line like a family of ducklings. Their faces were stern and somber. It was not a look of fear but one of determination. Even though this was their first real combat mission each knew they
were ready for the challenge. After today they would belong to the old timers club. They would no longer be referred to as greenhorns or rookies.

Less than thirty minutes later all seventeen of the b-29 super fortresses were taxiing into their assigned take-off position in line, waiting for final clearance from the control tower. Lt. Rochette guided his plane “The Rocket” into the fourth take-off position. In doing so he passed the number one plane nicknamed the “Dauntless Dotty” piloted by the Wing Commander, B/General Emmett O’Donnell. Next were the “Forbidden Fruit” and “Joker’s Wild” in the second and third positions. The aircraft nose art made the planes easy to identify by the decorative painting or design on the fuselage of the aircraft. Although the artwork began as a means of identification the practice evolved to express the crew’s individuality and as a personal protection against the perils of war. The tradition is almost as old as aviation itself.

The crisp early morning air was filled with the loud racket generated by the B-29’s four R-3350 Dodge reciprocating engines that were accelerating to move the General’s plane and sixteen others on to the active runway. As the “Dauntless” moved into position General O’Donnell adjusted the planes alignment slightly and continued down the runway in a rolling take off. It was common policy on a Saipan take-off for the pilot of a fully loaded B-29 to keep the wheels to the runway as long as possible before hauling back on the controls. As the plane lurched off the end of the runway the pilots usually dipped the aircraft nose toward the water below in an attempt to gain more speed and airlift. In this maneuver it seemed the planes belly almost skimmed the ocean below as the wheels were being retracted allowing the plane to gain more airspeed and altitude.

Many planes were lost because the pilot was unable to execute this local maneuver. The crews were shown a friendly reminder of this as the planes flew over the Saipan cemetery with its thousands of white crosses identifying the graves of the soldiers and airmen lost during the battle of Saipan. Lt. Rochette wondered if there was a hidden message in why the cemetery was situated in the flight pattern below for all to see and ponder. Probably not, he thought.

As Lt. Rochette urged the “Rocket” and its droning engines forward the plane finally reached its cruising speed of 195 mph. In spite of the seven and a half hour trip to the target at Honshu no one chose to sleep. A few hours later the co-pilot informed the crew they were less than 100 miles from the land of the Rising Sun. This was the signal for all of the crew members to don their Chutes, Mae-West and flak suits.

In full safety gear each member of the Rocket’s crew checked and rechecked their equipment. Even the gunners chose this opportunity to check the gun turrets operation and test fire their weapons. The CFC, Central Fire Control System, operated five Browning, M-2, and 50 caliber weapons and was controlled by Sergeant Ronald Blackmore from Rochester, New York. After
firing several bursts from each weapon he was satisfied with their operational performance. Sgt. Blackmore was itching to demonstrate his ability and accuracy but realized that failing to be challenged by any Japanese fighter planes meant that the crew would probably return home safely. He settled back into a more comfortable position while waiting and watching for the enemy. The youthful sergeant was confident and knew that he was well prepared for whatever came his way.

Today’s bomb run would not be made in formation. Each plane would make their own run, drop their incendiary bombs and high-tail it back to Saipan. The bomb release today would be from 6,800 feet, not the 30,000 high level releases as in the past. The bombing accuracy and reported damage should improve greatly. However, the low level bomb release also meant that the airspace will probably be full of anti-aircraft debris and Flak filling up the skies. All the crews are aware that Flak is bursting shells shot at aircraft from enemy guns on the ground. The metal and debris from the bursting shells shot at aircraft can bring an aircraft down as well as killing or injuring its crew members. Flak is usually concentrated at altitudes lower than 15,000 but can reach the higher altitudes up to 30,000 feet or higher.

Lt. John Dureen the navigator had done the crew proud, after six hours of flight the first Japanese island began to show on the radar scope. The plane was nearing the middle of the bomb run and most eyes were on the target when it happened. The skies ahead and around the plane were lit up like a festive celebration as every searchlight in the city was turned on us and we were the feature attraction. The lights were controlled by radar coordination. The firing of the Japanese anti-aircraft guns below was heard by everyone in the plane. The constant noise of the bursting Flak shells followed by the shaking, rattling and weird sounds caused by the metallic debris hitting the aircraft also had everyone’s attention.

Dutch Duffy the bombardier called out that he had lost visible contact with the target. He stated “the bright search lights have screwed up my vision”. As he tried to relocate his target the plane rocked and then a loud thump was heard. Someone alerted the crew that number four engine was in flames. The entire radar and adjacent compartments became awash with the bright yellow light radiating from the engine fire. The bomb run now became our second priority as we concentrated on the preparation and the possible order to Bail Out. Everyone except the pilot and co-pilot had their chest chute in hand and were waiting near their exit door for the bail out command. The order never came. Lt. Rochette our commander was keeping his cool under the extreme circumstances we faced.

Sgt. Munson the right waist gunner (closest to the fire) had screamed into the intercom earlier indicating that things were getting out of hand and that some of the men were beginning to become anxious. A short time passed and Munson keyed his mike again and said the fire seemed to be lessening. Duffy went back to work and managed to salvo our bomb load. We
noticed that our plane was not lit up by the search lights anymore. Later, we all theorized that the Japanese gunners thought that we were on fire and thus doomed so they took us out of the search lights.

Munson kept us posted on the engine fire status which was visibly out but a red glow could be seen smoldering on the right wing flap and aileron area. A few minutes later he keyed his mike and said he couldn’t see any more smoldering or burning on the right wing.

With the bombs gone, dropped at least a mile from the target area and the outboard engine on the right wing still smoking our commander put the “Rocket” on a course heading for an emergency landing at Iwo Jima. The field there had only been secured from the Japanese five days earlier, but right now that sounded good, especially with number four prop feathered and being more of a drag than a help. The damage to the right wing had caused us to lose at least 500 gallons of gas, so the commander’s decision to land at Iwo Jima made perfect sense. The plane most certainly would not have made it back home to Saipan.

After several hours of tense flight time and Iwo Jima finally in our view we prepared for a three-engine landing on a dirt and muddy runway. It became even more complicated when we later discovered that a Japanese shell had pierced the right wheel well door also resulting in a blown tire. After a hairy but successful muddy landing we departed the old “Rocket” and got our first view of Iwo Jima the most desolate, volcano formed and battle-scarred island full of nothing but shell holes, volcanic ash and steaming fissures. One thing that did look good to us was the 10,000 foot runway that had been constructed just days earlier by the corps of engineers. They did a really good job considering they had to work amidst the war that was surrounding them.

A group of fighting Marines visited us at the parking spot and marveled at how our boss brought the plane in safely with so much damage. Their next question was why we had a young lady riding a rocket painted on the nose of our plane. We explained that we called our plane the “Rocket” and the young lady riding the Rocket represented the pilot’s girlfriend back in the states. That seemed to satisfy their curiosity.

Feeling like VIP’s Rochette’s crew joined another crew that was being quickly ferried back to Saipan. Someone volunteered; they must want us back there pretty bad, since we had to leave our plane at Iwo Jima for needed repairs.

Three hours after departing Iwo Jima the ferry plane landed at Saipan and off-loaded its tired and hungry passengers. Soon everyone was seated in the Mess Hall downing a big plate of chipped beef on toast (AKA Sh-- on a Shingle) and hot coffee. Rochette’s crew was enjoying nearly the same breakfast they had consumed twenty-four hour previously. The only difference was they weren’t rookies any more. They felt like made men in the Mafia. When the “Rocket” came home a few days later, Rochette had the crew chief paint the Japanese bomb imprint on
the nose of the plane, indicating that the crew and plane had completed its first accredited bomb mission.

While the Rocket was under repairs at Iowa Jima General Lemay ordered more incendiary raids on urban areas in Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, Kobe and Yokohama. These raids took place from early May into the first week of June of 1945 with considerable damage inflicted on the aircraft engine factories at Musashi and Nagoya. As a result of this onslaught the Japanese aircraft engine industry was brought to its knees and was almost non-existent. Lemay knew the enemy had suffered severe military losses as well as civilian population losses which affected the Japanese public opinion. The American high command believed the Japanese people were ready to surrender but their military continued to fight and publicized their intent to fight to the death. The high command staff, including General MacArthur had planned and evaluated numerous invasions of the Japan main land and all plans predicted a casualty loss of over one million men from the invasion force.

With this in mind General Lemay ordered more bombing runs as well as propaganda leaflets to be dropped by the B-29’s warning of additional raids in the coming days. He chose to continue annihilating their cities until they decided to surrender. No one in the high command was willing to accept one million American causalities.

The next large scale attack planned by General Lemay was a force of 150 aircraft from the four B-29 units assigned to Saipan of the Marianas. Dubbed Mission #76 the raid was another Incendiary bombing of Kobe, Japan. Headquarters hoped this would be the last mission of this kind to Kobe.

**Mission #76**

**Attack and Destroy Kobe, Japan**

Today’s mission was very similar to the many others that had taken place on this god forsaken island of Saipan. The 150 chosen crews had an early morning breakfast just after 01:00 on the 5th of June in 1945. The menu included eggs, bacon, hash browns, toast and chipped beef, with plenty of hot coffee. Only the best for Uncle Sam’s finest.

The oversized mission briefing was taking place simultaneously in each of the units with planes participating. Attending the 498th Bomb Group, 73rd Bomb Wing and Squadron 874 briefing was Lt. Rochette and his crew aboard the “Rocket.” Those present included the aircraft commander Lt. Rochette and co-pilot Lt. Belgrade, Navigator Lt. John Dureen, Bombardier Lt. Dutch Duffy, and Lt. Kerchief the engineer. Others on the crew included the Radio Operator Sgt. Lower and Radar Operator Sgt. Liberi. The gunnery crew included Sergeant Ronald Blackmore, supervisor
and central fire control system operator. His gunnery buddies included SSgt’s Hayman and Clements on the left and right gun assignments with Sgt. Shorty Munson manning the small and confined tail gun compartment.

The briefing subjects were predictable as they discussed the proposed flight and bomb run weather, route check points, bomb targets, possible Flak location and possible fighter opposition and the best and safest routes home. Units will form their own formation and break up into individual bomb runs after rendezvous. Flight time to target will be about seven hours. The projected time of bomb release is 09:00 a.m. with estimated landing time at home base about 16:00. This mission like most of the others should last sixteen to eighteen hours considering early planning and after landing de-briefing meetings. The de-briefings are opportunities to learn valuable information that might save your life or the life of one of your comrades. Trading a little time for life, possibly your own, seemed like an even trade.

At two a.m. the skies over Saipan was jam-packed with 146, B-29s (4 planes aborted the mission) loaded with tons of incendiaries to be delivered to the land of the Rising Sun. Known only to the plane’s gunnery crew and Duffy the bombardier was the fact that many of the “Rockets” bombs contained the comic drawing of Kilroy, “of Kilroy was here” fame. Kilroy was everywhere from the latrine to the mess hall and the officers club; why not paint him on some of the bombs scheduled to land on the Rising Sun home soil at Kobe. To the gunners it seemed a fitting gesture. They were basically telling the Japs to stick it.

The next six hours were uneventful giving each of the Rocket’s crew the opportunity to reflect on the mission, their personal relationships or whatever crossed their mind. Some just spent the time double checking the equipment in their compartment.

The crew remained calm and collected when Lt. Rochette announced visual contact with Kobe on the early morning horizon. He thanked Lt. Dureen the navigator for guiding them to the target. The city lay partly in ruins and in some places still smoldering from recent raids. In spite of the previous damage the city defenders had the low level skies filled with Flak and other anti-aircraft fire. Rochette noticed several aircraft in the first wave that had been hit by the Flak thrown at them from below. He did not see any aircraft that had gone down but noticed others with obvious damage causing them to leave the formation for various reasons.

Lt. Duffy, the bombardier was busy making last minute adjustments when the pilot turned control of the plane over to him. Duffy noticed the time was 08:58 as he made his final flight adjustments and announced bombs away. As the bombs were falling, Lt. Rochette took back control of the plane and turned to the east heading away from the target.

Everyone in the plane felt the aircraft shudder when something hit the right wing. Almost immediately the pilot and co-pilot were forced to use their combined efforts to maintain
control of the plane. They tried using the auto-pilot system to no avail then continued as a team to fight for manual control of the plane. The aileron controls appeared to be heavily damaged. From his nearby compartment the navigator could see the flight crew struggling to regain control of the floundering aircraft. Glancing at his gauges he noted the time was 09:22 and their current location was about twenty miles past Japan’s lands’ end. The radio operator was heard trying to contact the two on duty life guards; Super Dumbo’s to apprise them of their location and dire condition. The word Dumbo was the code name used by the US Navy to signify search and rescue missions. The term Dumbo came from Walt Disney’s flying elephant character which appeared in 1941. The Dumbo’s originally carried a life boat that could be dropped to those in need.

As the “Rocket” continued to lose speed it was quickly overtaken by a swarm of six Japanese fighter planes looking for an easy kill. Sgt. Blackmore told his gunners they had free rein to shoot any targets within their area of sight. With the attackers coming from all directions Blackmore continued firing with his five fifty caliber cannons controlled by the central firing system. The gunners’ marksmanship accounted for two of the enemy’s six attacking fighters. Shorty, in the small tail turret was heard to say “I think I got one but damn it I’ve been hit; they just blew my arm completely off and I’m bleeding badly. Everyone was occupied so no help came.

The Japanese fighter’s next attack hit the “Rockets” number one engine causing it to lose oil and cease operation even though the propeller continued to wind mill. Sgt. Blackmore was heard to say my fire control system has been damaged and is on fire. I’ve been hit, but I’m trying to put out the fire. Lt. Rochette simply said, “Ron, just do the best you can”.

When the number one engine ceased operating most of the crew assumed that the order to bail out would be given. The co-pilot lowered the nose wheel in preparation while the Navigator, Engineer and Bombardier gathered at the rear bulkhead door anticipating the bail out order. The pesky fighters continued their relentless suicidal attack and succeeded in ramming the number four engine resulting in its failure. The remaining fighter pilots smelled blood and continued their brute assault by physically ramming their planes into the fuselage and empennage of the floundering aircraft.

When this happened the plane lurched violently to the right and Rochette was heard giving the order to bail out. Shorty, in shock, bleeding profusely from his missing arm now was feeling faint and weak and requested permission to come forward from his tail position. There was still no response.

Ron Blackmore heard the pilots order to bail out but was unable to comply with the order. His body was racked in pain and exhaustion from being shot and trying to extinguish the fire in his
compartment. He used this moment to glance at the picture he had pasted on the wall of his gunnery compartment. The black and white photo was of a young lady he had met while attending gunnery school in Texas. He remembered the inscription, “My Mexican Spitfire” even though he couldn’t read the words in his smoky compartment. His final thoughts turned to the wonderful times he had shared with her on those warm and sultry El Paso evenings. Knowing he was headed to his final Rendezvous with Destiny, Ron chose to share it with his Mexican Spitfire.

Meanwhile, Duffy the bombardier exited the plane first, followed closely by Lt. Kerchief the engineer. John Dureen noticed the plane’s altitude was at ten thousand feet as he struggled against the plane’s centrifugal force as it began to spin and twist while plunging downward virtually out of control.

Hearing the bail out order Sgt. Liberi the Radar Operator, moved to the rear escape door. As he shuffled through the waist gunner’s area he noticed the left gunner come through the armored door while the right gunner remained in his seat. Continuing toward the rear bulkhead door, Liberi felt the plane continue to gyrate as he continued his struggle toward the exit door. At the door his left leg became caught between the fuselage and door frame. Using his right foot he was able to force his way to the exit where he jumped into the whooshing sound of the on rushing air.

His first reaction was to pull the chute ripcord, which he did to no avail. The second tug brought a bright billowing canopy over his head. His descent seemed endless. After hitting the water he inflated his Mae West and glimpsed a raft nearby. When he reached it he found that it was occupied by Duffy the Navigator.

Rochette and his co-pilot were last seen by Dureen struggling with their one man life rafts on the flight deck as the spiraling plane was falling from the sky. Unknown to the crew the pilot and co-pilot returned to their seats and tried to regain control of the plunging plane. While struggling with the controls Rochette believed he smelled the faint odor of dehydrated onions seeping into the cockpit area. Then his last thoughts were of his solo flight to get his pilot’s license in Vacaville, California. He reflected, it’s funny how you remember things like that. Neither Rochette nor co-pilot Belgrade was fully aware of the plane impacting the water.

As Dureen finally exited the plane, a split second later, he noticed what looked like a body, without a chute, come out of the rear escape hatch just before the spiraling plane struck the waters below. He estimated he was 1,000 feet above the crippled ship when it hit the water and exploded. Dureen remembers seeing the body being hit by the plane’s wing but was unable to identify the crewmember. The navigator’s parachute opened allowing him to scan the sky for open chutes before he plunged into the Sea of Japan. He saw none, although his
mind was filled with thoughts of how he was going to get out of his parachute harness when he landed. Knowing that he couldn’t swim made the situation much tenser for him.

Dureen remembered unhooking the leg straps on his chute but didn’t have the courage to unhook his shoulder straps. He decided to just hold them and open them just before contacting the water. Then he realized that he was under water. Trying to hold his breath he unhooked the chute and inflated his Mae West. His panic level rose when he realized that only one side of his Mae West had inflated. With much anxiety Dureen was able to get his one man life raft inflated and ready for use. When he crawled into it he could hear the hissing sound as the raft began to deflate from a puncture.

He saw and heard the radar operator yelling at him from about 150 feet away. The word drowning was all that Dureen could understand so he moved as quickly as he could towards the frantic voice. He noticed Sgt. Liberi was tangled in his chute’s shroud lines but was in no danger of drowning since he was wearing his inflated Mae West, even though it was not properly fastened to his chest. Dureen worked at cutting the tangled lines hoping to free his comrade. As Dureen tired from his efforts to free Liberi, he saw the engineer Lt. Kerchief some distance away in his own raft. With much effort Kerchief and Dureen joined forces and managed to free Liberi from his chute, inflate his raft and put him into it.

The trio drifted through the scattered wreckage of their downed bomber where they found a seven man life raft which was of no use to them because the compressed air cylinder was empty. They did however manage to gather several emergency items from the larger raft. Drifting uncontrollably in the choppy waters they managed to frequently drop their emergency dye packets into the waters hoping they would be seen by search crews. During this period the survivors continued to call out and search the crash site for any evidence of the remaining crew members.

At 10:25 a.m. the men recognized the noise overhead as that of a Super Dumbo, their on duty life guard aircraft. It was a sight and sound that each of them was happy to hear and see. The Dumbo dropped a rescue package to them but it landed too far away to be reached. However, a colony of sea gulls quickly attacked the package and tried to no avail to get it open. The worn out airmen were pleased when the Super Dumbo continued to circle their location but were concerned when the Dumbo dropped a smoke bomb in their vicinity. Possibly they were afraid of Japanese submarines in the area.

Their fears were calmed somewhat when the survivors noticed the huge submarine conning tower appear in the smoky haze surrounding their small flotilla. The men in their dinky little rafts looked like dwarfs as they drifted toward their rescuer. Only then did the wet, cold and
exhausted, but relieved survivors finally realized their destiny might include living life and not just drifting on the choppy waters like a wandering nomad while pondering their fate.

Razorback Rescue Operation

It was 5 June 1945 at 11:45 a.m. when the four survivors were finally pulled aboard the submarine. The Submarine Commander, Lieutenant Commander Donald Brown introduced himself to the airmen and told them they were aboard the USS Submarine Razorback, #SS 394, attached to squadron 24 of the Pacific Fleet. In idle conversation, Brown casually mentioned to the survivors that the Submarine was named after the Razorback Whale and not the Razorback hog affiliated with the University of Arkansas.

The official Log Book of the submarine Razorback for 5 June 1945 from 00:00 to 24:00 covered the following rescue actions as reported by officers in charge of their rotating three hour duty shifts. The following entries are actual excerpts from that log, having been declassified some 67 years later.

The period 00:00 to 09:00 indicated the sub was underway in accordance with COMTASKFORCE 17 operation order100-45. This life guard duty required patrol of specific waters along the anticipated return routes of B-29 aircraft involved in the Kobe bombing raid. The submarine changed course frequently, ran submerged and on surface, altered engine speeds as needed and used many zig zag courses as security precautions.

At 09:15 we sighted black smoke that lasted about 15 seconds. We sighted two unidentified enemy planes at 200 feet and at a distance of two miles. At 11:15 observed enemy float type plane that turned and headed away. At 11:27 we sighted green slick on water surface and saw life raft bearing 358 degrees. 11:38 picked up US airman, Lt. Dureen, who stated that he had been approached several times by Jap fighters but never shot at. At 11:45 spotted three life rafts tied together with three men in them. Survivors identified as Lt. Liberia, Lt. Duffy and Lt. Kerchief of the 498th bomber group on Saipan. All men were in good health having jumped from their damaged B-29 plane, radio call sign Mascot 31 also known as the Rocket. Commenced searching the area for additional survivors, none found. Dureen also stated that another crewmember possibly bailed out right after Dureen but an open chute was never seen. The remaining seven crewmembers, two of which were known to be wounded, apparently spun in with the aircraft, which exploded at impact.
At 20:15 the sub Razorback made radar contact with the USS Dragonet #293 for the purpose of transferring the rescued army fliers. At 22:00 succeeded in passing a line to commence transfer of survivor’s by rubber boat to the Dragonet.

Transfer of survivors was completed at 22:15. We set home base course at standard speed on one main engine. At 23:53 changed base course to 270 degrees. The Razorback log was closed out at 24:00, signed by R.S. Thompson, Lt. and approved by the ships navigator and commander.

Back on Saipan news of the four “Rocket” survivors made its way to the bomber headquarters. The warm news of their survival was tempered by the knowledge that their seven friends, buddies and crewmen were gone forever. Nothing was going to change that. Even though the four survivors were safely on board the Dragonet, it would be almost a month before the submarine Dragonet would dock at Guam and deliver its cargo. In the meanwhile flimsy yellow telegrams notifying the families that their loved ones were missing in action were sent through the Western Union to the families of the missing airmen.

Follow up letters of confirmation of death and condolences were later dispatched by the War Department to the families of the seven crew members that perished when the “Rocket” went down.

**Final Rendezvous with Destiny**

**Achieved, Confirmed and Authenticated**

When the Boeing B-29 Super fortress aircraft, tail number 42-24742, (AKA the “Rocket”) plunged into the icy waters of the Sea of Japan on 5 June 1945 it achieved its preordained destiny. The predetermined Rendezvous occurred when it crashed at the location 33-45N and 136-25E. The plane played a large part in the young lives of pilot Lt. Rochette, Lt. Dureen the navigator and Sergeant Blackmore the planes gunnery supervisor; as well as the other crewmembers. You might say the other members of the crew were either in the wrong place at the wrong time or they were very unlucky to be included in the fate of this trio.

We will never know the complete story surrounding the Rockets date with Destiny, who selected it, how it was chosen and the main part, why there was a rendezvous to begin with? Just as we don’t know how or why our three young airmen were randomly selected from the 26 million young lads in 1920 America. God works in mysterious ways; maybe it was his chosen plan for our three young Americans. It just was and they just were.

What we do know is they each represented their nation in the best of tradition, honor and duty. All gave some, while some gave all.
Submarine “Razorback” SS 394 and Crew

Submarine “Razorback” on mission, longest combat serving submarine, 56 years
TO: General Carl Spaatz  
Commanding General  
United States Army Strategic Air Forces

1. The 509 Composite Group, 20th Air Force will deliver its first special bomb as soon as weather will permit visual bombing after about 3 August 1945 on one of the targets: Hiroshima, Kokura, Niigata and Nagasaki. To carry military and civilian scientific personnel from the War Department to observe and record the effects of the explosion of the bomb, additional aircraft will accompany the airplane carrying the bomb. The observing planes will stay several miles distant from the point of impact of the bomb.

2. Additional bombs will be delivered on the above targets as soon as made ready by the project staff. Further instructions will be issued concerning targets other than those listed above.

3. Dissemination of any and all information concerning the use of the weapon against Japan is reserved to the Secretary of War and the President of the United States. No communiques on the subject or releases of information will be issued by Commanders in the field without specific prior authority. Any news stories will be sent to the War Department for special clearance.

4. The foregoing directive is issued to you by direction and with the approval of the Secretary of War and of the Chief of Staff, USA. It is desired that you personally deliver one copy of this directive to General MacArthur and one copy to Admiral Nimitz for their information.

[Signature]
THOS. T. HANDY
General, G.S.C.
Acting Chief of Staff

War Department letter directing use of Special Bomb
Survivors transferred to Submarine Dragonet USS #293,

**Prologue**

In spite of losing our participants to their perilous rendezvous the war with Japan still raged on. Your Author would be remiss if he didn’t follow the story to its final ending.

The Kobe bombing raid and the “Rockets” rendezvous occurred on 5 June 1945. At that time several military options were being considered to help bring the Japanese hierarchy to the table of surrender. The thought of losing one million soldiers on the beaches of Japan still lay heavy in the minds of those responsible for stopping the endless slaughter.

General Lemay continued his blitz of incendiary bombing of all the major cities of Japan. On 28 July of 1945 less than two months after the loss of the Rocket at Kobe the leaders of Japan were asked for their unconditional surrender. This offer was ignored by the Japanese commanders. They still held out hope for a dramatic turnaround in the fighting.

Unknown to most people is that on 25 July 1945 a special order from the United States War Department, classified as Secret was delivered to the Saipan headquarters. This secret document (later declassified and attached) confirmed orders to drop a special bomb on a day of choice, weather pending, any day after 3 August 1945 on one of the following Japanese target cites, Hiroshima, Kokura, Niigata, or Nagasaki. The document insinuated additional special bombs would be delivered and other cities chosen as targets. New appeals for Japan’s surrender were sent, but also ignored on 5 August.
This prompted the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima, Japan on 6 August 1945. The Special Bomb was delivered via B-29, # 4486292, nicknamed the “Enola Gay.” The plane was named after the mother of its pilot, Colonel Paul Tibbets who was also the commander of the 509th Composite Group.

The Special bomb, code name “Little Boy” weighed about 10,000 pounds and was loaded, but not armed, into the Enola Gay’s bomb bay. For safety reasons it was not armed until after take-off. The five b-29 aircraft mission group included the bomb drop plane, plus two weather and two photographic planes. The primary target was Hiroshima, Japan. Weather over the target city was clear and Little Boy was released at 8:15 am. The blast occurred 43 seconds after release causing a large mushroom type cloud and blast waves that buffeted the Enola Gay some twelve miles away at detonation time. Pictures of the bombs detonation were broadcast around the globe, hoping to urge Japan to accept the surrender terms.

Later analysis of the damage indicated only 1.7% of the bombs fissile material actually reacted. Scientists considered this as ineffective in spite of the damage report of 4.7 miles of the city destroyed plus 70,000 to 80,000 casualties and 70,000 wounded. The Enola Gay landed safely back at Saipan its home base twelve hours and thirteen minutes after their early morning take-off.

Following this event Japan was again asked to surrender. This offer was also refused.

Three days later Major Charles Sweeny guided his aircraft, B-29, AKA Bockscar, over the secondary city of Nagasaki, Japan and released his bomb nicknamed “Fat Man” because of its wide, round design shape and its 10,300 pound weight. The ground damage and casualty losses were similar to those of Little Boy. Kokura the primary target city was spared only because it was partially obscured by smoke from a previous day’s raid by 224 B-29s.

Six days later on 15 August 1945 Japan’s Emperor announced Japan’s acceptance of unconditional surrender. The official surrender ceremony came nearly four long years after the Japanese cowardly attack at Pearl Harbor. The actual surrender documents were signed by General Douglas MacArthur, and others, on 2 September of 1945 aboard the U. S. S. Missouri anchored in Tokyo Bay.

Several years later special monuments called the Missing in Action or buried at Sea Tablets, located at the Honolulu Memorial in Hawaii were established by the American Battle Monuments Commission to pay homage to the many warriors that gave their lives and to commemorate those whose bodies were never recovered from the fields of battle. The names of the Rockets missing crewmen have been included in this national monument which honors over 28,000 of their fallen comrades. The memorial is an appropriate avenue to recognize and honor their ultimate sacrifice. The fallen were in most cases promoted to the next higher rank,
awarded the Purple Heart and other appropriate medals such as the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal.

As a reader of this story please do not forget that the happenings described herein are true, accurate as much as 63 year old records can be and were actually lived and performed by these Hero’s. We thank each of them for their courage, commitment and allowing us to intrude on their lives.

And so the saga “Rendezvous with Destiny” officially comes to an End.

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