

The Tinian Atomic Bomb Files

DECLASSIFIED

■ BY DON FARRELL

Choosing Tinian:

December 17, 1944 - February 14, 1945

(A Portion of Chapter 11)

On February 8, 1945, the same day Roosevelt was making his deal with Stalin on Russia's entry into the war against Japan, Commander Frederick L. Ashworth, deputy officer-in-charge of the Los Alamos Laboratories Ordnance Division, left Washington, traveling with the highest priority rating and bounced his way across the Pacific to Guam, arriving there on the 10th. He was under orders to hand-deliver a top-secret letter from Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Fleet (COMINCH), to Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief Pacific Ocean Area, (CINCPAC) who had recently moved his headquarters forward from Pearl Harbor and knew nothing of the atomic bomb project. Ashworth was to

brief Nimitz on the Manhattan Project and choose the best place in the Marianas for the 509th Bombardment Group's Silverplate bombers and the ordnance and atomic bomb assembly areas needed for "Operation Centerboard," the atomic bombing of Japan.

General Lauris Norstad, who directed all B-29 operations in the Pacific from D.C. and was the senior Army Air Force officer advising General Leslie Groves on the Manhattan Project, was well aware of the progress of construction and air activity on all Pacific bases. Norstad was also aware of Saipan's shortcomings and the naval base construction problems on Guam, along with the advanced state of Tinian's North Field, where the 313th Bombardment Wing had recently arrived.

Ashworth arrived at a most inopportune time. Guam had been destroyed by six weeks of American air and naval bombard-

Background Information

MP is proud to present this major pre-publication coup, the second installment of a two-part exclusive sneak peek at excerpts from local historian/author Don Farrell's soon to be published masterwork on the part Tinian played in the most significant event of the twentieth century. *Declassified: The Tinian Atomic Bomb Files* will be the only complete history of how the bombs came to be created and ultimately sent on their world-changing missions from a previously little known island. The book is richly laced with the written and spoken words of all the leading actors in the drama, from Roosevelt and Truman, right down to the scientists, mechanics and pilots who brought a radical idea to its horrifying, but war-ending conclusion.

The full account explores events far earlier than those that led directly to the bomb drops as Mr. Farrell takes the reader back to third century Asia and the onset of Western imperialism to answer the questions: "How in the world did mankind get into such a state of madness that atomic warfare became an option? How did we get to Hiroshima and Nagasaki?"

A bonus to MP readers is Mr. Farrell's gracious offer to take orders for the first printing and add a personalized signature to books hot off the press (Go to www.marianashistory.com). Now, dive into this MP exclusive to find out what really happened to make peaceful little Tinian go down in history as the place from which the nuclear weapons age was launched.

ment prior to the July 21, 1944 invasion and nineteen days of heavy combat that followed. Thousands of Seabees had arrived in the five months since the island was declared secure on August 9. It was on that date that Nimitz surprised all by announcing his intentions to move his headquarters immediately to Guam, the largest and southernmost of the Marianas.

Nimitz's deputy, Vice Admiral John Henry Towers, was driving his naval construction battalions and army engineering battalions hard. He recognized the importance of completing the new Guam Naval Operating Base as quickly as possible. Submarine tenders would be stationed there to give America's silent service the ability to stay in Japanese waters longer and have more firepower. The NOB would also have a ship repair facility to maintain the battle fleet at the front and a supply

depot to keep the men of his fleet well-armed and well-fed. On Guam, naval base construction took priority. However, on Saipan and Tinian, air base construction had top priority.

Fortunately, Admiral Towers had been one of the U.S. Navy's premier aviators and gave the air base construction his personal attention. Although the B-29 runways were slowly being carved out of Guam's heavily wooded northern plateau, the naval base construction took precedence. On Saipan and Tinian, Towers had been able to give air base construction top priority, after hospital construction, which was badly needed in preparation for the invasions of Iwo Jima, Okinawa and Japan. Seabees had begun work on the runways as soon as those islands were secured—Saipan first, then Tinian. The Army Air Force's General Curtis E. "Hard Ass" Le-

May arrived on Guam on January 20, taking command of the new XXIst Bomber Command, which included Superfortresses from the 73rd Bombardment Wing on Saipan and the 313th Bombardment Wing that had just begun flying into Tinian, landing on unpaved runways. Although the Seabees were still working on Runways 3 and 4, the 38 Superfortresses already on Tinian were able to fly their first fire-bombing mission to Kobe, Japan, on February 3 (Craven and Cate, p. 569).

With Admiral Towers giving highest priority on Guam to naval base construction, Admiral Nimitz's new office on top of Fonte Plateau, renamed "Nimitz Hill," was far from complete when Ashworth came knocking on Nimitz's door. Along with organizing his new forward headquarters, Nimitz and his staff were also extremely busy executing the recently-adopted plan



In support of the invasion of Tinian, Seabees from the 302nd Special Pontoon Detachment installed a pontoon "dock" at White Beach so that larger ships could quickly unload men and equipment to repair Ushi Airfield and begin its conversion to North Field. (Seabee Archives)

for the final defeat of Japan. The invasion of Iwo Jima, "Operation Iceberg," was scheduled for February 19, just a week away. Capturing Iwo Jima was vital to both the Navy and the Army Air Force because it would eliminate the Japanese land-based bombers that had been raiding Saipan and Tinian constantly, knocking out B-29's on the ground. It would also eliminate the Japanese fighter aircraft based there, which had been shooting down B-29's headed to and from Japan. More important yet, once in American hands, Iwo Jima would give the U. S. another B-29 base—one much closer to Japan, allowing the big bombers to carry more bombs to more targets.

Furthermore, American fighter aircraft based on Iwo Jima could then escort B-29's on their missions to Japan, protecting them from the Japanese fighter interceptors based on Okinawa and in Japan itself. Finally, as would prove necessary for hundreds of aircraft, Iwo Jima would serve as an intermediary base for wounded or disabled B-29's and other aircraft looking for a friendly place to land. So even as Ashworth came bearing more orders, Nimitz was already buried under piles of detailed plans for delivering the 70,000 men of the 3rd, 4th and 5th Marine Divisions to "Sulfur Island," some 650 miles north-northwest of Tinian—halfway to Japan. Admiral Nimitz had little time for an unknown commander from the States.

Thus, naval weapons expert Commander Fred Ashworth's unannounced appearance was as ill-timed as could be. Moreover, he wasn't very presentable when he got there. Having been stationed at 7,500 feet in Los Alamos all winter, Ashworth wasn't ready for tropical heat and humidity. Even though February is the middle of the trade wind season in the Marianas, the most comfortable time of year, the humidity was still stifling to someone who had just left the ice and snow of New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Mountains. To make matters worse, he had flown non-stop from D. C. to San Francisco to Hawaii to Kwajalein and finally to Guam—on military aircraft with no air conditioning and much less than first class comfort and

amenities. By the time he showed up at Nimitz's office, his khakis were "so wrinkled and sweaty that Lamar, Nimitz's flag secretary, was hesitant to admit him to the inner sanctum." (Potter, p. 381) However, when Ashworth pulled out his temporary duty orders, signed by Rear Admiral W. R. E. Purnell and directing him to deliver a personal letter from Fleet Admiral King to Fleet Admiral Nimitz (who had only recently received his fifth star), the door was opened with alacrity. Once inside and alone with Nimitz, Commander Ashworth unbuttoned his shirt and pulled a damp and stained but still readable letter from his sweat-soaked money belt and handed it to the admiral. Nimitz slit it open and took out King's letter, dated February 1 and marked "Top Secret." The letter read:

My dear Nimitz:

It is expected that a new weapon will be ready in August of this year for use against Japan by the 20th Air Force.

The Officer, Commander Frederick L. Ashworth, USN, bearing this letter will give you enough details so that you can make the necessary plans for the proper support of the operations. By the personal direction of the President, every thing pertaining to this development is covered by the highest order of secrecy, and there should be no disclosure by you beyond one other officer, who must be suitably cautioned.

I desire that you make available to Commander Ashworth such intelligence data as applies to the utilization of the new weapon.

Sincerely yours,

E. J. King,

Fleet Admiral, U.S. Navy (Thomas,

p. 81)

Nimitz buzzed in his chief of staff, Vice Admiral Charles H. "Soc" McMorris, and handed him the letter. As had been suggested by Groves, Ashworth began his interview with Nimitz by passing along a "hello" from General Groves and Captain William Sterling "Deak" Parsons, then briefly described the new weapon and told him it would explode with the power of about 20,000 tons of TNT and destroy a whole city. He then laid out the Navy's role in the bomb project, as agreed to by King and Purnell, and respectfully requested Admiral Nimitz's and his staff's complete support for the 509th Composite Group's operations in the Central Pacific Theater.



(Leon Smith collection)



(NARA)



(NARA)

Commander Frederick L. Ashworth (top photo), naval ordnance expert from the Los Alamos Laboratories, was the man responsible for briefing Admiral Chester Nimitz (center photo), Commander Pacific Ocean Area, about the atomic bomb program and the need for a base of operations in the Marianas. Ashworth then visited Tinian, where he met with Tinian Island Commander Brig. General Frederick von Harten Kimble (bottom photo, second from left), U.S. Seventh Air Force. Kimble took Ashworth to North Field, where they identified the future site for the 509th Composite Bombardment Group, the Group Ordnance Area, and the site for the atomic bomb assembly buildings.

According to Nimitz's biographer, E. B. Potter, it appeared to Ashworth as if Nimitz was distracted during the discussion of the bomb's technology due to the thought that one bomb might wipe out an entire city and all its inhabitants.

Potter recorded what Nimitz then said to Ashworth:

Young man, this is very interesting, but August is a long time from now, and in the meantime I have a war to fight. Furthermore, please tell Admiral King

that I cannot abide by his requirement to inform only one officer on my staff if he expects me to provide the support I am sure will be needed. You tell him that I must inform my operations officer, Captain Tom Hill, who will have the responsibility to see that the support is provided. (Potter, p. 381) [Fortunately, Hill was exactly the man Parsons had requested to be the Guam liaison officer.]

Ashworth's main responsibility on this mission was to inspect the facilities on Guam and Tinian, and recommend the

one that would serve best as base of operations for the 509th Composite Group and Project Alberta. He knew some favored Guam, others Tinian, and had with him the long list of questions posed at the Los Alamos meeting by General Groves and the others who had entrusted him with this critical decision. He had been told that Captain Hill would take care of him on Guam and that General Frederick von Harten Kimble (U. S. Army Seventh Air



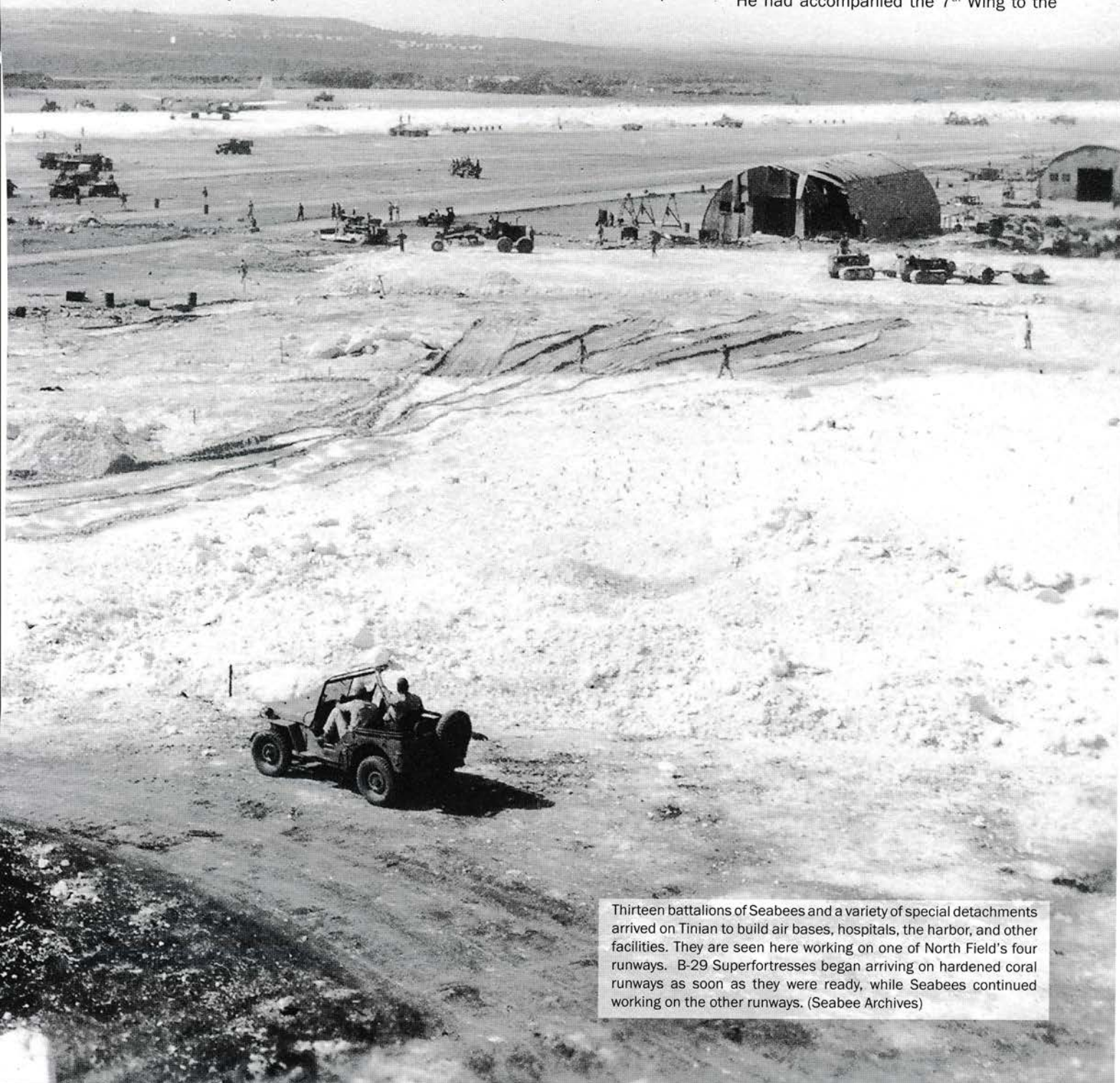
Force), Tinian's Island Commander, would do the same there. Kimble was charged with overseeing all activities on the island, airbase construction, in particular. When Ashworth arrived on Tinian and linked up with General Kimble, he had his first opportunity to use the magic word, "Silverplate," authorized by Groves. From what he said later, it is apparent that Ashworth had already become convinced that the new base of operations would be somewhere on Tinian.

When I arrived on [Tinian], I re-

ported to the Island Commander and told him that in connection with a "Silverplate" project I wanted to stake out some real estate on his island for a special operation. He recognized the significance of "Silverplate" and said he was at my service. He suggested if it was an air project, the north end of the island would be most appropriate for there were extensive B-29 operations going on there. We rode in his jeep to the north end of the island; I indicated the areas I thought would be satisfactory and asked him to hold that area for future use. (Krauss, p. 18)

Kimble, a pilot himself, would prove

invaluable to the bomb project (Craven and Cates, p. 533) and was an excellent choice to command Tinian operations. He had earned his wings in 1923 and by July 1940 was a member of the Plans Division in the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps. Less than a year later, he was made chief of the Air Port Section, Building and Grounds Division, and then served a year as commanding officer of the Air Corps Advanced Flying School, followed by a year commanding the 7th Flying Training Wing. He had accompanied the 7th Wing to the



Thirteen battalions of Seabees and a variety of special detachments arrived on Tinian to build air bases, hospitals, the harbor, and other facilities. They are seen here working on one of North Field's four runways. B-29 Superfortresses began arriving on hardened coral runways as soon as they were ready, while Seabees continued working on the other runways. (Seabee Archives)

Pacific in October 1944; and by November, he had relieved General James Underhill, U.S.M.C., as Tinian Island Commander, with headquarters atop the ridgeline overlooking Sanhalom Bay, one of the most beautiful views in the Pacific.

As Ashworth's memo states, Kimble had taken Ashworth to North Field to check out its new runways. There he would have

When Kimble and Ashworth drove south along 8th Avenue to the harbor, the latter was pleased to learn that by March 15 the new Tinian dock facilities would be adequate to handle shipments of supplies necessary for Manhattan Project purposes. The 50th and 27th Special Naval Construction Battalions of the 6th Naval Construction Brigade had been hard at work

Ashworth returned to Nimitz's office on Guam and drew a circle on an aerial photograph of North Field, Tinian. Nimitz looked it over, nodded his assent, and ordered Captain Hill, now officially Admiral Nimitz's liaison officer to General Groves and the Manhattan Project, to make it happen. Later, both Groves and General Norstad agreed, as did Tibbets, that Tinian was the right choice. Satisfied that he had the answers to all of the questions asked at Los Alamos, Ashworth boarded the first available plane for the long ride back into the New Mexico winter.

Immediately upon returning from the Marianas, a slightly sun burnt Commander Ashworth reported to Groves as ordered. His report on "The Base of Operations of the 509th Composite Group" was officially dated February 24, although General Groves's memorandum of February 23, which follows, could not have been written before hearing Ashworth's oral report:

... Prior to this inspection tour it had been proposed to base the Group on Guam. The AAF Headquarters in the forward area had recommended Tinian as the base. In view of the results of the tour of inspection, it has been decided that Tinian is the most desirable island on which to base the 509th Composite Group. ... (RG 77, box 3)

After reviewing Ashworth's report and accepting his recommendation that the 509th should be based at North Field, Tinian, Groves sent the following memorandum to General Norstad, discussing the "Decisions Concerning the Movement of the 509th Composite Group." In it, he advised Norstad that Tinian had been chosen, suggested that Tibbets (who was in Colorado at the time) should be called in to make final decisions on movement dates as well as the final composition of the 509th, and advised Norstad that:

... At a meeting at Headquarters, 2nd Air Force in Colorado Springs, Colorado, yesterday, Colonel P. W. Tibbets [sic] agreed to arrange to be in Washington about 3 March so that all remaining decisions concerning the movement of the 509th Composite Group could be completed at that time. ... (RG 77, box 3)

Just before Ashworth had left Los Alamos for Guam, General Arnold had decided that (per Tibbets's request) rather than



Seabee Vance Shoemate, Chattanooga, TN, directs truckers unloading coral for Tinian's B-29 runways. (NARA)

seen the 40 or so B-29's of the 313th Wing that had already arrived and were using runways 1 and 2 (renamed Able and Baker by the Air Force) in preparation for their next mission to Japan, as well as the thousands of Seabees who were working double shifts to complete runways 3 and 4. Ashworth further noted that there was sufficient space just north of Runway Able, northernmost of the four parallel airstrips, where hardstands and taxiways could be constructed for the 509th's Silverplate bombers. The atomic bomb assembly buildings could be built about a half mile away along the isolated northwest coast, and the ordnance area sited just west of the runways. Both could easily be fenced to provide adequate security.

on the project. The 67th NCB would be assigned to do whatever construction jobs the 509th Group might require at North Field (Groves, p. 279). Tinian was ideal for the atomic bomb project for several other reasons in addition to the quality of the runways. It was far more secure than Guam, having no civilian population other than the Japanese, Okinawan, and Korean refugees who were confined in Camp Chulu. And most important to the pilots, it was 100 miles closer to Japan than Guam was, saving 200 miles worth of fuel on the round trip. Housing the men of the 509th was a problem someone else would have to deal with when they began to arrive in three months. Other than that, he felt Tinian was perfect.

rework the modified B-29's the 509th had been using, the group would receive brand new Silverplate specials with all the most recently-developed "goodies" installed: new fuel-injected engines; Curtis electric reversible-pitch propellers; pneumatic bomb bay doors; engine-mounted front collector rings; and other mechanical improvements. All the armor and guns would be removed except for the tail-stinger. At that time, Glenn L. Martin-Nebraska was given the order for the additional Silverplates under the condition that the first was to be ready not later than March 31, 1945 (only two months later); thirteen more by April; two in May; two in June; two in July; two in August; and two in September.

On February 13, General Barney Giles, deputy commanding general of the U.S. Army Air Force in the Pacific, sent a note to Colonel Doubleday, General Norstad's liaison officer to the Manhattan Project:

Gen. Giles has asked Col. Doubleday for answers to following:

1. Is proposed early departure date (March 1) of Ground Echelon of 509th necessary? [Handwritten notation in the margin reads, "Now April 1."]

2. Final settlement of location base for 509th? (Settle by CINCPAC and others in 2 wks.) Col. Doubleday indicated Gen. Giles was not satisfied with answers he [presumably Ashworth] gave as Col. Tibbetts [sic] gave him [implying Tibbetts had spoken to Giles outside of channels]; and that he [Giles] appeared to want to talk the job over with you – es-

pecially since Gen. Arnold is to be away for some time. JAD (RG 77, box 3)

Another note dated the same day advised Groves that there was sufficient time for a short delay while they made some more decisions now that Tinian had been decided on:

Col. Tibbetts [sic] can take a 4 weeks delay on move of Ground Echelon – from March 1 to April 1. He can stand this delay because the new airplanes won't be ready for flying away much before May 30. Grd. Ech. Move date of April 1 is better from all around picture. [That would put the 509th ground forces on Tinian well before the 509th Silverplates began to arrive.] JAD (RG 77, box 3)

The answer to Giles' question regarding the departure date for the 509th ground echelon was still under discussion the next day. Captain John Derry advised Groves that:

Colonel Doubleday indicated to me during a telephone conversation today that it was indicated to him that it was desirable that the readiness date [not the departure date] for the ground echelon of the 509th Bombardment Group be set back fifteen days to 15 March in place of the thirty days suggested on 14 February. The reasons given for this were shipping and priority commitments placing the ground echelon of the 509th on movement orders for the month of March. If we set the departure date to 1 April it appears that it may be possible they might not even get moving during the month of April. (RG 77, box 3)

That then settled the question not only of where the atomic base would be lo-

cated, but also when the first of the 509th would leave the States and begin to arrive on Tinian.

Shortly after President Roosevelt returned from Yalta and with the site of the advanced base chosen, General Groves decided to turn up the heat at Los Alamos. He froze the design of the plutonium implosion-type bomb at two types of high explosive lenses, the most difficult of the engineering problems (Goodchild, p. 134), and told Oppenheimer he wanted the plutonium bomb ready to test by mid-July, well ahead of the proposed schedule. Groves's order ruffled some scientific feathers, but it released needed staff to help Professor Kenneth T. Bainbridge, who was in charge of the implosion mechanism, keep pace with the program. Ruffling feathers didn't seem to bother Groves very much. He knew he hadn't been hired for his sparkling personality, but only to get the job done and bring the war to an end.

On the global front, significant decisions had been made between mid-December, 1944 and mid-February, 1945. The heads of state of the United States, England, China—and, tentatively the Soviet Union—had laid their plans for the ultimate defeat of Japan that would culminate in an armed invasion of the Japanese home islands—at the estimated cost of hundreds of thousands of Allied lives and an unknown number of Japanese. The ap-



Several B-29's were named in honor of the Seabees, who built the Army Air Force runways and their camps. Here the men of the 13th Naval Construction Battalion pose with the B-29 named in their honor. (Seabee Archives)



A Tinian B-29 squadron flies over the island. (NARA)



A group of hard working Seabees from the 112th Naval Construction Battalion takes a moment to pose in front of one of their bulldozers. The tall man at far left, with no shirt, is Clifford Imler of Galesburg, IL. (Courtesy of Imler family)

appropriate admirals and generals were ordered to set about finalizing their individual plans for the invasion.

Unknown to China and the Soviet Union and known only to a handful of Americans and Brits, the decision had also been made that Tinian would be the launch-pad of atomic warfare, which it was hoped would make the question of an invasion of Japan and Russia's entry into the war moot. It thus became an urgent matter to decide who would be assigned to Tinian as officer-in-charge of the "advanced base facilities" there and General Groves's personal liaison officer. It would have to be a man of great ingenuity, tenacity, patience, and the ability to get along with a variety of admirals and generals, captains and colonels, to whom the purpose of his mission would have to remain secret. As usual, Groves already had a man in mind.

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