

The Tinian Atomic Bomb Files

DECLASSIFIED

■ BY DON FARRELL

Introduction

On July 16, 1945, the same day that J. Robert Oppenheimer and General Leslie Groves' Trinity Test brought the "light of a thousand suns" to the New Mexico desert, the heavy cruiser *USS Indianapolis* steamed out of San Francisco Bay, bound for Tinian, a tiny island in the western Pacific. Bolted to the deck of that ill-fated ship was the basic assembly for "Little Boy," America's first atomic bomb. The active uranium projectile that would make it functional was bolted to the deck of the captain's cabin. While Groves, commanding officer of the Manhattan Project, and his deputy, General Thomas Farrell, flew back to D.C. to prepare their report for the president, the "Fat Man" assembly team—residents of the Los Alamos Laboratories at the time—packed their bags and boarded an army aircraft at Kirtland Air Field, New Mexico, for a direct flight to North Field, Tinian, by then the largest operational air base in the world. There, in buildings constructed by U.S. Navy Seabees under the direction of Colonel Elmer E. Kirkpatrick, Jr., U.S. Army



North Field, Tinian, the busiest airfield in the world in 1945. (Leon Smith photo, courtesy of Richard Campbell)

Background Information

MP is proud to present this major pre-publication coup, the first 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.



The Big Three: British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, U.S. President Harry Truman, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin. (National Archives)

Corps of Engineers, they would complete the final assembly of “Little Boy,” as well as “Fat Man”—the plutonium bomb that had just successfully passed its one and only live test.

In Washington, as soon as Mrs. O’Leary, Groves’ personal secretary, finished typing the final report, the general handed it to the special courier who had been anxiously standing by. The top-security courier was driven to a nearby airfield, where he boarded an aircraft that had also been standing by, and flew directly to Potsdam, Germany, where Secretary of War Stimson and President Truman had been anxiously awaiting his arrival. A conference between the big three—Truman, Churchill, and Stalin—called to decide the fate of the post-war world, was due to begin the following day and Truman wanted the results of the Trinity Test in his pocket before meeting with Stalin. Meanwhile, Farrell packed his bags and headed for Tinian to take command of “Operation Centerboard,” the plan to drop atomic bombs on Japan.

The following day, having studied Groves’ report and shortly after receiving concurrence from Chiang Kai-shek, Harry Truman announced via a radio broadcast the Allied demand for the “unconditional surrender”—or else—of Japan, while the formal copy of the declaration was being delivered to the Japanese government through diplomatic channels. It read in part:

We call upon the Government of Japan to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all the Japanese armed forces, and to provide proper and adequate assurances of their good faith in such action. The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction.

Shortly after the ultimatum was issued, Stimson left Potsdam and re-boarded the cruiser *Augusta*, which had carried the

American delegation to Amsterdam. From there, as instructed by the president, he issued the order authorizing General Spaatz to use the bomb:

1. The 509th Composite Group, 20th Air Force, [based on Tinian] will deliver its first special bomb as soon as weather will permit visual bombing after about 3 August 1945 [the day after the Potsdam conference was scheduled to end] on one of the targets: Hiroshima, Kokura, Niigata and Nagasaki. [Author’s notes within quoted material are enclosed in brackets. Parentheses and notes within are from original file.]

With the requisite sense of urgency, the “Little Boy” team on Tinian finished assembling the 9,700-pound bomb from the key components that had arrived there aboard the *Indianapolis* on July 28.

When the Allied conference at Potsdam came to an end, President Truman joined Stimson aboard the *Augusta* for the long voyage home. He had warned the Japanese about the consequences of not accepting the surrender terms, but they had rejected the ultimatum. There was nothing left for him to do but enjoy the cruise across the Atlantic and wait for history to take its course.

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More than a year earlier, General Groves had chosen *New York Times* science writer William Laurence to be his “official news correspondent” for the atomic “events.” Unfortunately, a paperwork glitch held the journalist up in San Francisco. Laurence arrived at North Field the day before the mission, but after the flight’s manifest had been completed, which scotched his hopes for an eye-witness account. Nevertheless, he still had the “scoop” of the century. Under serious pressure to deliver the story and hindered by the restrictions imposed by Groves, Laurence began

interviewing members of the *Enola Gay* crew who would fly the first atomic strike mission, as well as various others on Tinian who were involved in "Operation Centerboard." He sat through the pre-flight briefing, watched the show on Runway Able as the crew boarded *Enola Gay* under lights worthy of a Hollywood premier, and then sat down to write the story that would help win him a coveted Pulitzer Prize.

After Laurence wired off the body of his piece, he sat by the radio with General Farrell and waited for a message to arrive from Col. Paul Tibbets, *Enola Gay*'s commander. Minutes after dropping the bomb, Tibbets reported the event to General Farrell, who quickly decoded the message and scratched out his own to Groves:

[Quoted material appears here in the book.]

Groves then wired his own message to Truman, which was handed to the president while he was at lunch with sailors in the galley of the *Augusta*:

[Quoted material appears here in the book.]

With great gusto, he announced to the men that the war would soon be over, drawing cheers from the crew. At the prearranged hour of 11:00 a.m., August 6, 1945, the following message was released to the Washington media by General Groves, on behalf of the President:

[Quoted material appears here in the book.]

When the *Enola Gay* arrived back on Tinian some thirteen hours later, Laurence sat through all the jubilant debriefings held in the officer's club, where a special meal and a liberal supply of alcoholic beverages were available, and then hammered out the following lead story for America—and the world—most likely with some members of the 509th reading over his shoulder:

[Quoted material appears here in the book.]

The story of the century received top billing in every newspaper and radio station in the world. As soon as the newspapers



Captain William S. Parsons (standing center) and Colonel Paul W. Tibbets, Jr. (with pipe) brief the flight crews the night before the mission to Hiroshima. (National Archives)

landed on Tinian from the States, they were dropped all over Japan by B-29 pilots who sincerely prayed another such story would never have to be written. On Tinian, per orders from General George Marshall, U.S. Army Chief of Staff, Farrell produced the following pamphlet which was immediately dropped on Japan by B-29's based on Saipan:

[Quoted material appears here in the book.]

The Japanese did not respond.

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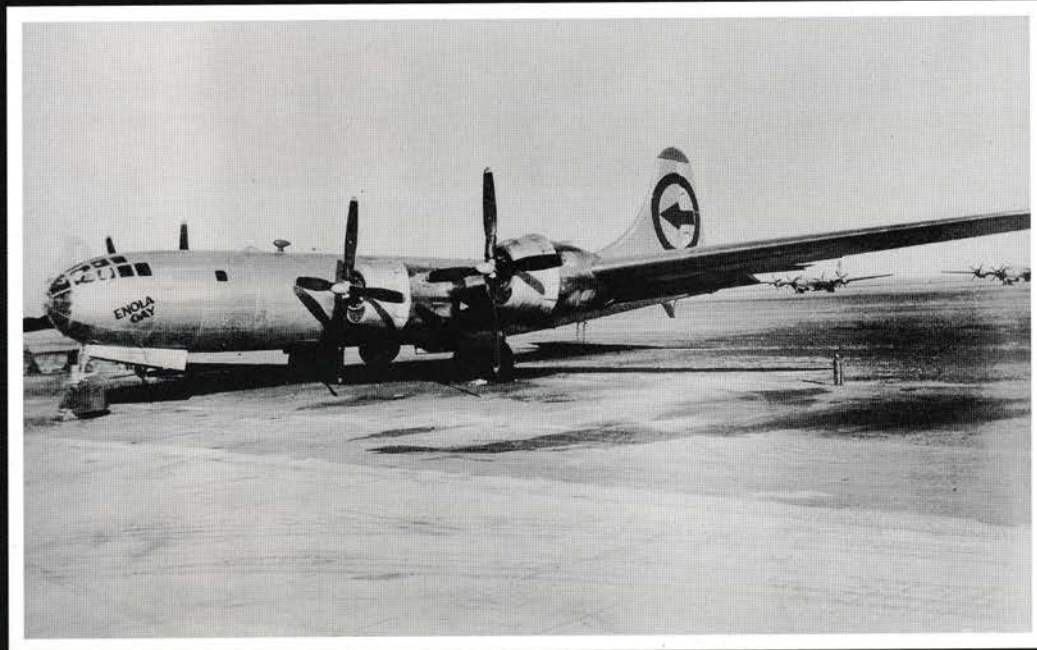
The morning after the "Little Boy" drop, Col. Kirkpatrick sent a status report on "Fat Man," the far more powerful plutonium bomb, to Groves. The active sphere, he said, was:

[Quoted material appears here in the book.]

He also reported that day on a consensus that had been reached among the commanding officers on both Guam and Tinian who were aware of the project:

It is recommended that the list [of targets] be revised to include several large cities. It is expressly recommended that the region of Tokyo be included as a table six line fifteen (target). . . ." (August 7 RG 77 Box 19 T.F.)

Weather over Japan became a problem for Truman's "rain of ruin." It was typhoon season, after all. America's strategy had been a one-



The *Enola Gay* on North Field, Tinian. (National Archives, Manhattan Engineering District)



Dr. Norman Ramsey oversees the assembly of "Little Boy." (National Archives)

two punch, the second bomb coming as quickly as possible after the first. Very much to their chagrin, the scientists' tests were cut short. The propaganda campaign designed to convince the Japanese to surrender had no effect. So, on August 8, General Twining, ComGenAF 20, ordered General Spaatz to drop the next atomic bomb: "The 509th Bomb Group, using special munitions, will strike either Kokura or Nagasaki at approximately 091030K." (RG 77, box 17, 19)

That evening, Russia declared war on Japan, seriously compounding Japan's dilemma. At 0100 August 9, Moscow time, they crashed across the boarder into Manchuria, sweeping aside the remaining units of the Kwantung Army. Only a few hours later, the B-29 later named *Bockscar* lifted off from Tinian with Major Charles Sweeney at the controls, even though the sky to the north of Tinian was crackling with thunder and lightning and it had been discovered that the auxiliary fuel tank could not be accessed. The omens were not good.

When the estimated time of drop passed and there was no word from the aircraft, a nervous General Farrell advised Groves from Tinian:

Centerboard - No bomb away report received one and one half hours overdue. No contact with strike aircraft. Have contact with one escort aircraft who failed to rendezvous with strike aircraft at dawn. [Reportedly, General Farrell stepped outside and tossed his cookies about this time.]

As we know, "Fat Man" did fall on Nagasaki that day, despite bad omens and unforeseen glitches. Laurence, who actually got to fly on this mission, filed the following story (reproduced in part here), which clinched him the Pulitzer Prize that year:

[Quoted material appears here in the book.]

Although mostly everything in the lengthy story was true, it was far from the whole truth. In fact, the mission had been fraught with problems. Even before the plane left the ground there were bad omens. One plane did not make the rendezvous.

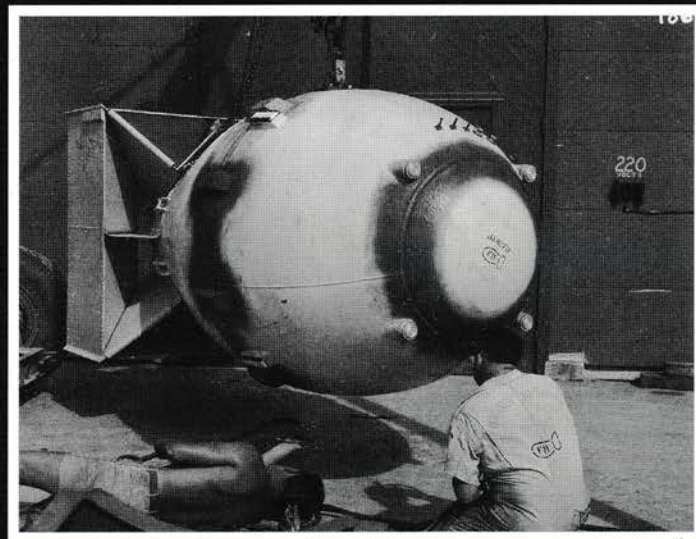
The primary target was covered with smoke from Yawata, another city LeMay's Superfortresses had incinerated the day before. The *Bockscar* landed on fumes and a prayer at Okinawa, an island that didn't have a B-29 runway. Later, Commodore Parsons—who was present on Tinian when the crew arrived home at about midnight that night—memorialized the event as follows:

Accounts carry impression to listener of exceedingly hard task but one executed with great skill and judgment. Lucky that pilot Sweeny and Ashworth have stamina and stout heart for job would otherwise not been done. (Farrell to Groves)

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The active plutonium sphere for the next bomb was being completed at Los Alamos and prepared for shipment to Tinian. No decision had been made on the primary target for that bomb. However, because of the Tinian Atomic Bomb Files, part of Record Group 77 in the U.S. National Archives, we know that Tokyo was high on the list of the commanders in the Marianas.

Fortunately for many Japanese, in the absence of a consensus from his cabinet, Emperor Hirohito personally called a meeting of Japan's top leaders, something no emperor before him had ever done. At ten minutes before midnight, in the imperial presence—before the Supreme Council and the cabinet—Prime Minister Suzuki read the Potsdam Declaration and apologized to the emperor for not being able to gain a consensus from the military



Final coat of special sealant is applied to "Fat Man." (National Archives)

and civilian leaders. After some hours of listening to the various continuing arguments, Suzuki reaffirmed the lack of consensus and asked the emperor which proposal should be adopted—the one stated by the Foreign Minister (acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration) or the one containing the four conditions (proposed by the military leadership).

According to historian Butow, the emperor rose and all the men at the table immediately rose and stood at attention, reverently. The emperor spoke:

[Quoted material appears here in the book.]

With only a clarification regarding the post-war status of the

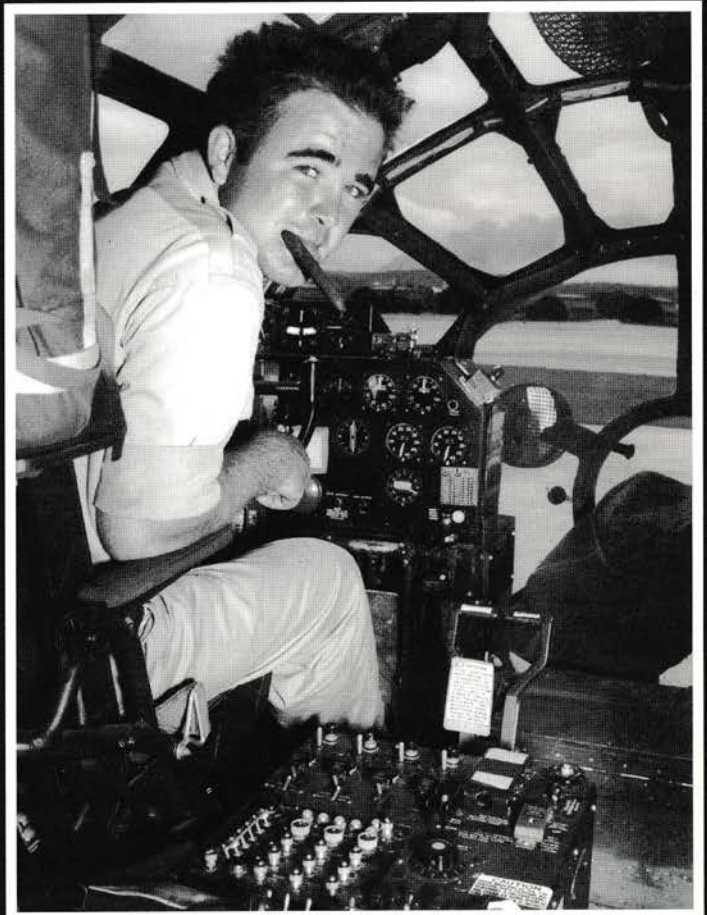


Seabees on Tinian examine the B-29 named in honor of the 6th Naval Construction Brigade, the men who carried out the massive construction projects on Tinian in support of the U.S. World War II efforts. (Seabee Archives)

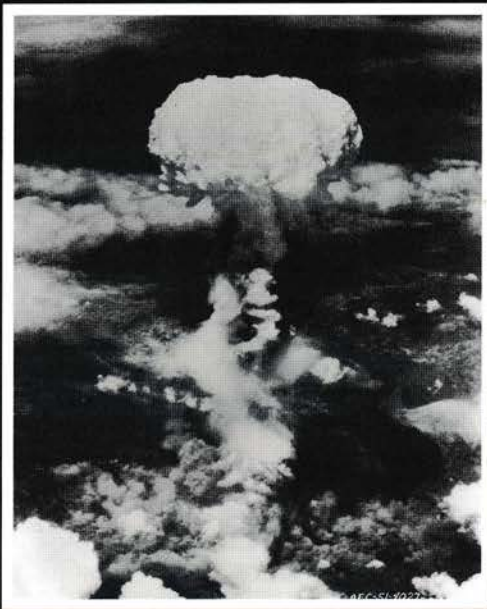
emperor, Hirohito took to the air waves on August 15 for the first time in Japanese history, to personally announce his decision to accept the Potsdam Declaration. He ordered all Japanese troops to lay down their arms immediately and "bear the unbearable," American occupation of the Japanese homeland. America's two billion dollar gamble had paid off. The killing was essentially ended throughout Greater East Asia, although there were some instances of Japanese beheading Allied prisoners before the POW camps could be relieved, and the Russians did not cease offensive operations until August 21, following the Battle of Shimushu—the last battle of WWII. (Hasagawa, p. 263)

But the Tinian Atomic Bomb Files do not end there. The war was not yet over for the Manhattan Project personnel on Tinian. The surrender would not actually occur until September 2. Although the plutonium core for the third bomb had been held back in the States, the 509th was ordered to remain on Tinian until November, still available in case the Japanese reneged on the surrender. MacArthur was already preparing to land his occupation troops. However, no occupation personnel would be allowed to enter either Hiroshima or Nagasaki until representatives of the Manhattan Project had checked on the level of radioactivity that remained in the area. General Marshall personally ordered General Farrell to lead the 2nd missions to Hiroshima and Nagasaki from Tinian. Fittingly perhaps, Colonel Tibbets and Major Sweeney would fly to Japan to personally inspect the damage they had done to their respective targets.

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Major Charles Sweeney at the helm of *Bockscar*. (Leon Smith photo, courtesy Richard Campbell)



The "Fat Man" explosion over Nagasaki. (National Archives, Atomic Energy Commission)

the world's first nuclear weapons—the men who created and dropped the first atomic bombs. Besides telling us how the tiny island of Tinian was chosen to be the launch-pad of atomic warfare, these amazing documents also reveal how the vital components of the bombs were moved there from a variety of stateside locations and what really happened on that island during the final anxiety-ridden weeks of the greatest joint military/scientific experiment in the history of mankind. They also disclose details of the super-secret first scientific missions to Hiroshima and Nagasaki following the drops and chronicle the final demobilization and departure of

Sometimes truth is better than fiction. That is certainly true in the case of the Tinian Atomic Bomb files, a small portion of the Manhattan Project files preserved in Record Group 77 of the United States National Archives. Because therein lie the official messages and orders written by the men most responsible for the

troops from Tinian. Moreover, the files clarify some of the misconceptions about what is universally considered the most significant event of the 20th century—a major turning point in world history.

Although the use of the bombs was undoubtedly instrumental in forcing the imperial surrender that brought the Pacific War to a sudden, climactic, and decisive end—saving thousands, if not millions of lives—armchair presidents and revisionist historians soon began to question the wisdom of Truman's decision. Post-war media moguls, not all that different from their William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer prototypes, profited well from the public debate on America's atomic policy. Perhaps the best response ever given to those who question the decision came from a popular opinion poll conducted shortly after the war's end, wherein 82% of the respondents agreed that it was the right thing to do at the time. A popular saying among those who supported the use of the ultimate weapon was and still is, "If there hadn't been a Pearl Harbor, there wouldn't have been a Hiroshima." (Campbell, p. 5)

The Tinian Atomic Bomb Files do not answer the lingering question, "Was it really necessary for the United States to use the bomb to end the war?" Nor do they answer, "Was dropping the bombs justified?" However, they do clarify how and why the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and they do verify the total commitment made by the personnel of the many-faceted Manhattan Project to bring the war to an end before the proposed invasion of the Japanese home islands became necessary. But before considering the moral questions surrounding the dropping of the first and only atomic bombs ever used in combat, particularly as it is now more than six decades after the event, it is necessary to put those questions in the context of the times. We must ask ourselves, "How in the world did mankind get into such



"Hiroshima is no more." (National Archives, Atomic Energy Commission)

a state of madness that atomic warfare became an option? How did we get to Hiroshima and Nagasaki?"

(The author wishes to acknowledge and thank the Northern Marianas Council for the Humanities for the grant awards that made it possible for him to conduct the research necessary to write this book. Special recognition and appreciation is also extended to maia, Tinian social/peace activist, for her tireless effort in editing the original manuscript. Finally, gratitude is extended to John Coster-Mullen for reviewing the manuscript for this article and providing helpful comments.)

Postscript

General Paul Tibbets passed away this very month—on November 1, 2007. One of my greatest honors was to have served as Master of Ceremonies at an event in June 2004 honoring General Tibbets at North Field Tinian on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the battles for Saipan and Tinian. General Tibbets was the featured speaker that day and he spoke with heart about the mission he was given and the job the 509th did to help bring the war to a speedy end. Americans were dying at the rate of about 1,000 per day at the time they dropped "Little Boy." Including the Japanese, Koreans, Chinese and other Asians, about 5,000 were

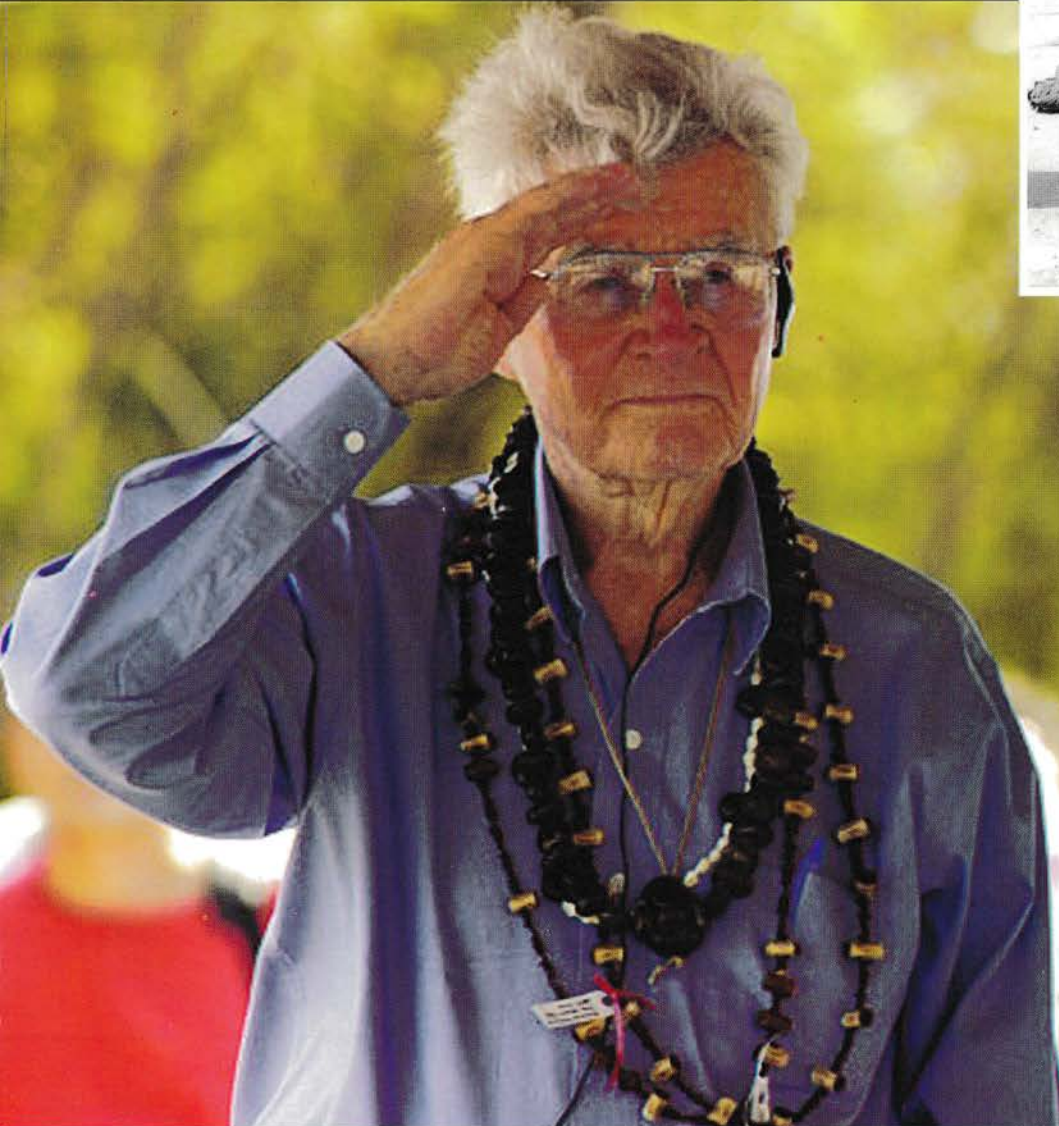
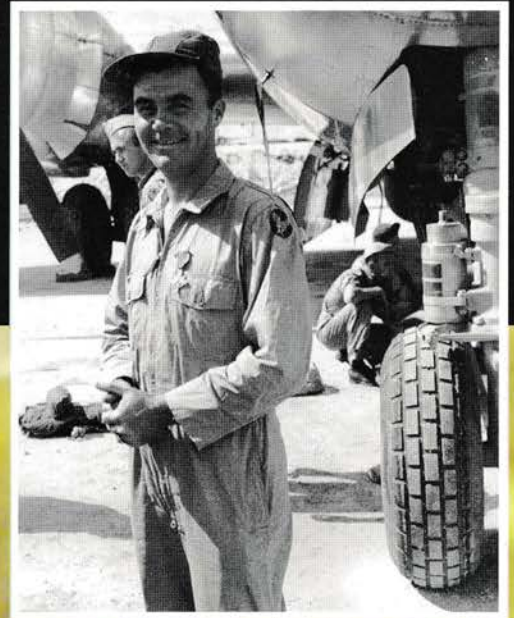
dying per day. That number increased dramatically when Russia busted into Manchuria on the morning of August 9. The shock of a second bomb and the slaughter the Russians were perpetrating against the once powerful Japanese Kwantung Army caused Hirohito to accept the Allied demand for "unconditional surrender" on the 10th. Because of the question over allowing Japan to retain its emperor system, the killing did not stop until the 14th, except for the Russians who did not quit until the 21st.

General Tibbets was, above all things, a steadfast patriot, who did his duty. In his own words, "They wanted a man who would not flinch and I was that man."

Don Farrell

Tinian

Tibbets smiles for the camera after receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross from General Spaatz, Commanding Officer of the 20th Air Force, immediately upon his return to Tinian from Hiroshima.



General Paul W. Tibbets, Jr. (Ret.)
June 16, 2004
North Field, Tinian
(American Memorial Park website)