

LOCAL AIR FORCE VETERAN DONATES WORLD WAR II B-29 COLLECTION TO TTU

Air Force veteran Bob Mann donated 18 boxes of documents, photos, videos and manuals regarding the B-29 airplane.

TTU -- With the information contained in 18 boxes of documents, photos, videos and manuals housed in the Jeannette and Angelo Volpe Library archives at Tennessee Tech University, a good mechanic could probably build a B-29.



The boxes are a new archival acquisition, donated by U.S. Air Force veteran Robert Mann, of Cookeville. Mann has spent more than three decades tracking down and collecting B-29 memorabilia. His collection includes the serial numbers, aircraft names and ultimate fate of most of the more than 3,900 B-29s that were built during World War II.

"One day, I said to myself, 'I wonder what happened to 44-62094?' That was my airplane," Mann said. "I started digging around and it grew like Topsey. "

Mann joined the Air Force after he graduated high school. He spent two years in the early 1950s in Guam, part of a ground crew for a B-29 converted for weather reconnaissance. During that time, his squadron also tracked typhoons and radiation from the nuclear bomb tests in the Pacific. He left the Air Force in 1952 as a sergeant.

"I loved the airplane," he said. "The engines, I don't feel the same way about the engines. They were oil leakers, you'd have a few leaks that you'd have to fix after every flight."

After working the flight lines for three years and his years of research, Mann can give all the reasons why the plane and engines had problems. The plane's production was rushed; they were mass produced without prototype testing and each plane came off the assembly line with a list of modifications that had to be made because of engineering design changes.

Boeing submitted the first XB-29 to the Army in 1939, before the U.S. entered World War II. Among the B-29's innovative features were guns that could be fired remotely and pressurized crew areas. The earliest B-29s were built before testing was finished, and the first flight of a B-29 was Sept. 21, 1942, according to Boeing. All of the B-29s were built in the U.S. at factories in Atlanta; Renton, Wash.; Wichita, Kan.; and Omaha, Neb. Production ended in 1946.

Mann's collection lists where each plane was made, which modification center it went to and how long it spent there, which base it went to for overseas deployment and the date it left the U.S. He has written five books about the B-29s and their history.

"If it exists and it's about a B-29, we probably have - if not the actual thing - at least a reference to it," said TTU archivist Mancil Johnson. "With the stuff that's in these boxes and a decent machine shop, you could probably build a B-29."

The B-29 was the heaviest production plane, grossing up to 140,000 pounds because of its 5,000-mile maximum range and 20,000-pound bomb load. With a top speed of more than 300 mph, the bomber had an 11-member crew, 12.50 caliber machine guns and one 20 mm cannon.

The U.S. used B-29s in the China-Burma-India and Pacific theaters during World War II. As many as 1,000 B-29s at a time bombed Tokyo from the Marianas Islands, and the B-29 Enola Gay dropped the world's first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. Three days later a second B-29, Bockscar, dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki. Shortly thereafter, Japan surrendered.

"It's the airplane that basically caused Japan to surrender. Not just the atom bombs, there were no strategic targets left in Japan by June of 1945," Mann said. "There was nothing but ashes; they burned the country to the ground. And they were starving them to death with the aerial mining all of the shipping lanes coming into the islands."

After the war, B-29s were adapted for several functions, including in-flight refueling, anti-submarine patrol, weather reconnaissance and rescue duty. The B-29 saw military service again in Korea between 1950 and 1953. The last active B-29 was retired from service in September 1960.

The collection fits well with Tennessee Tech's history. During World War II, TTU offered training for young men who wanted to be in the Air Force but needed some basic training before attending bombardier school or pilot training.

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