

BOMBS AWAY

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN
Thursday, 30 July 2009, Section B
By Megan Trotter

COOKEVILLE – With his new book, “The B-29 Superfortress Chronology, 1934-1960,” Cookeville resident Robert Mann is now the author of three published reference books.



This aviation historian and specialist in the B-29 aircraft has been putting together these reference books since 1995.

“I got sort of a reputation of having a lot of information,” he said.

(Pictured: Cookeville author Robert “Bob” Mann shows a portion of his B-29 aircraft memorabilia at his home office).

“People were calling me and asking me questions. About the third time I heard the same question, I thought, ‘Maybe I ought to write the answer down.’ I stick it in a loose-leaf binder and then after I couldn’t find it about the third time, I said, ‘I think I need to organize this binder.’ When I organized it, I said, ‘I think I’ve got a book here.’”

In his first book, “The B-29 Superfortress: A Comprehensive Registry of the Planes and Their Missions,” Mann lists each of the 3,965 B-29s built, their primary assignment, name, tail code and date of disposition or loss as well as mission and target lists and lists of variants of the aircraft.

His second book, “Aircraft Record Cards of the United States Air Force,” details the paperwork that tracked the status and location of each plane in the inventory. The Air Force kept track of this information on record cards.

“The Air Force kept trying to get more and more information on that simple sheet, so they went to codes,” said Mann.

The problem is that the codes were never streamlined. Each agency used their own codes. There are also at least 21 different formats of the form itself. In order to be able to understand what is written, the reader needs to know not only which form was used but from which agency the codes come. Mann’s book explains it all in great detail.

Personal experience with the B-29 aircraft was the springboard for Mann's three books. For three years he worked as a crew member, maintaining the B-29s. Two of those years were spent with the Typhoon Chasers – pilots who would fly in and around storms in order to take measurements to find out what direction and how fast a typhoon was going.

Mann says he will never forget the first time he rode one of the aircraft into the eye of a storm.

“It was magnificent. It was like the old Roman amphitheaters. Solid cloud all the way around.”

According to Mann, in the seven years of B-29 operations, the 54th Weather Recon flew 12 million miles and entered 130 typhoons more than 700 times with a loss of only two airplanes.

Mann's aircraft expertise has also had other applications. About two years ago he was contacted to be an expert witness in a lawsuit. The company Raytheon was running an aircraft refurbishing facility at an old Air Force base in Kansas, when they were hit with a lawsuit for groundwater contamination. They brought in a representative for the company who attempted to give evidence that the groundwater contamination actually came from the B-29s when the facility was an Air Force base.

“My job was to refute everything he said,” Mann explained.

Thanks to his expertise, Mann was able to write a detailed report refuting each of the company's claims and was partially responsible for the decision to place the full responsibility of the cleanup on Raytheon.

So what plans does the three-time author have for his future? Another book. He is currently kicking an idea around with his editor about a book dedicated to operational code names, acronyms and abbreviations for the 20th Air Force in the Pacific.

Mann's latest book “The B-29 Superfortress Chronology, 1934-1960,” will be available for purchase in October of this year with a list price of \$49.95. Both of his previous titles are still available for purchase. The books can be ordered at Books-A-Million, www.Amazon.com or by contacting the publisher at 800-253-2187 or www.mcfarlandpub.com.

BOMBS AWAY

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN
Thursday, 3 July 2009, Section B
By Megan Trotter

COOKEVILLE – Cookeville author and B-29 expert Robert “Bob” Mann had just started announcing the release of his third reference book when he received an e-mail

from former Cookeville resident Robbie Harris with a request. She asked for help in publishing the journal of her late father-in-law, Col. Samuel R. Harris Jr., the commander of the 499th Bombardment Group, who flew B-29s during World War II.

Mann agreed to take a look and was intrigued by what he read.

“The family really wanted to get it published because they thought it was interesting. I read the thing, and I saw it as a really important historical document because I’d never seen anything by a group commander describing what he did,” Mann said, “I have come to admire that man quite a bit after reading (his journal) three or four times.”

The resulting book, which Mann agreed to edit, is “B-29s Over Japan, 1944-1945: A Group Commander’s Diary.”



Harris was an outspoken advocate of low altitude nighttime firebomb raids on Japan during World War II instead of the high altitude bombings that

were completely missing their targets. His frustration was compounded because he seemed to be the only commander willing to admit that they were performing poorly.

(Pictured: An example of one of the B-29 airplanes that Col. Samuel Harris Jr.’s bombardment group flew).

“He was convinced he had good pilots, but they couldn’t seem to hit the target,” Mann said. “He got upset and said, ‘It’s not a game. We’re in this to do something. And we’re not doing it. Let’s admit that we’re not doing it and find out why we aren’t doing it.’”

“The thing I thought was a great compliment to him, was that when he was leaving (to be transferred), he went down to Guam – (Curtis) LeMay’s headquarters was on Guam. He went in and saw him. He told him if he, LeMay, had the authority, he would have killed the transfer orders and kept Harris there working for him. I consider that one hell of a compliment, considering LeMay did not suffer fools. He was known to fire people on the spot,” Mann said.

Harris also had strong opinions on other topics. For example, on Nov. 9, 1944, he writes, “This is a most peculiar place. If the sign outside didn’t say ‘Officer’s Club’ – anyway, from where I sit I can see blue, green, pink and white panties and one complete lack of

same. These are supposed to be Officer's Wives. Ungraceful, unromantic, undignified and unsmart...I wonder how much real love is wrapped up in the package of them? I expect many of them are unsatisfied with husbands still in the rabbit stage.

Harris was fiercely loyal to his own wife, Nancy, as many of his journal entries show a surprisingly tender side to this rigid military man.

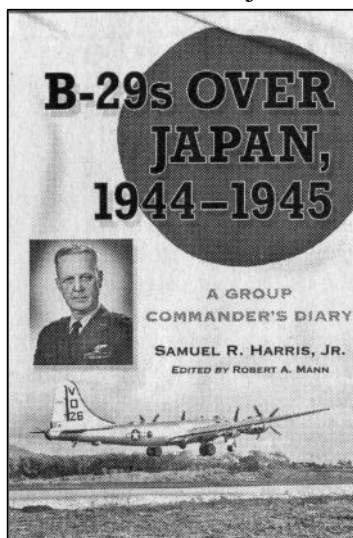
In one entry he writes, "good night, Nancy, my own love. Being away from you brings me close to you. A paradox? No – just a realization of how much of me is you – crystal clear in the knowledge that it will be a long, long time before I hold you and say I love you."

Another time he ends an entry with, "I miss Nancy terribly. I wonder if I will ever be able to entirely convince her that she is and has been for 16 years the only woman I will ever love or even allow in my life."

Though Harris' personal observations about his wing and his personal life were interesting to Mann, when he showed it to his publisher, McFarland & Company, they told him the manuscript was not quite long enough to be put into sellable book form. Mann took another look to see what could be done.

"I realized that (when he is writing) Harris is looking down into his group, as he should be, because those are his people, his airplanes. These are the people he cares about," Mann said. "So what I thought I would do was take this 73rd Bomb Wing that this group was part of and I would create a diary complementing what he did."

Mann, being a pro at looking up old records, went through mission reports and added his own notes to the journal, describing what the whole wing did, such as weather strike missions, training missions and search missions, in addition to what the other groups were doing.



As Mann was working on the book, he felt a connection to Harris, since Mann worked maintenance on B-29s and even worked for two years with typhoon chasers, flying right into the eye of storms to take measurements.

"(Harris) made a statement a couple of times in (his journal) of how he spent the day down on the flight line with the maintenance people. I was one of the maintenance people, and the last thing I wanted to see was the squadron commander or the group commander showing up, because he may have been smart about running a maintenance organization, but he wasn't that smart about maintenance.

You've got to live with that machinery to know what's wrong with it. I shuddered when I read this because I could picture what these mechanic were mumbling," Mann laughed.

“B-29s Over Japan, 1944-1945: A Group Commander’s Diary” is now available for purchase through www.amazon.com or the publisher at 800-253-2187 or www.mcfarlandpub.com.

*Read more about the History of Putnam Co., TN and it’s people at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>