

“WOULD I DROP THE ATOMIC BOMB AGAIN? YES, I WOULD”

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Theodore Van Kirk was the navigator aboard the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima 65 years ago. Now the sole survivor of the crew, how does he live with the deaths of 200,000 people?



Theodore Van Kirk is sitting at his desk in a detached bungalow in the gated community where he lives outside Atlanta, Georgia. The room is cluttered with boxes, trinkets, shelves full of books on wartime history, and photographs of planes on the walls.

He picks up a large calendar from the floor and begins flicking through it. "Let's have a look at what's coming up on 6 August," he says. Finding that date, he holds up the calendar. The page is empty. "Nope, nothing there."

The absence of any plans is unusual, because Van Kirk is usually heavily in demand on 6

August. This year, he tells me, he has been invited to travel, all expenses paid, to Tinian, the tiny Pacific island where, 65 years ago on that same day, he set out with 11 other men on an aeroplane journey that would change the world. But this year, Van Kirk declined the invitation. He just didn't feel like it, he says.

His uncharacteristic inactivity is explained by the fact that none of the 11 crew members who joined him on that fateful flight will be in Tinian this year, and without them he didn't have the stomach to go. Over the last 65 years they have fallen one by one.

The first was William Parsons, a military engineer who died in 1953, followed by Robert Shumard, another engineer, 14 years later. Others died through the 80s and 90s; and Paul Tibbets, the commander of the plane, in 2007. And then, less than two months ago, Morris Jeppson, a bomb expert, became the penultimate member of the crew to pass away, dying in a hospital in Las Vegas.

Which leaves Van Kirk as the only living crew member of the Enola Gay, the B-29 bomber that set out from Tinian on 6 August 1945. The bomb they carried, dubbed Little Boy, was the world's first atomic bomb dropped in combat. Its target: Hiroshima.

Jeppson's death on 30 March has left Van Kirk, "Dutch" to his friends, as the standard-bearer for a flight that has come to symbolise the terrible destructive power of nuclear warfare. He is fully aware of the burden he now shoulders. "I read the papers as they reported Morris's death, and they all said that Van Kirk is the last survivor. Now I get asked all the questions."

'We knew there was something special going on'

Van Kirk was 24 when he joined the crew of the Enola Gay and by then he had already flown more than 50 bombing raids over Europe and North Africa. Most of those flights were in the company of his great friends, Tibbets and Thomas Ferebee, the Enola Gay's bombardier. Together, they formed the core of the Hiroshima mission.

In the six months prior to the mission they and other members of the 509th Composite Group had been holed up in Wendover Field, Utah, training for an unspecified bombing run amid total secrecy. The words "atomic" and "nuclear" were never mentioned.

"We knew there was something special going on," he says. "You couldn't be in the 509th and not know something was up. They told us we were going out to do something that would either end or significantly shorten the war. They told us that the weapon we were going to drop would destroy an entire city."

On top of that, they saw hundreds of physicists milling around the base, one of whom Van Kirk recognised from the cover of Time magazine. "After all that, if you couldn't figure out it was an atomic bomb you were pretty damn stupid. If you talked about it you were even more damn stupid, as you would be transferred instantly to the

Aleutian islands, where you could talk all you wanted and nobody would listen."

A few months before the mission, the pace of preparations picked up. The crew was told that the bomb they would drop would be so powerful that their plane would need to be at least 11 miles away when it detonated or else it would break up. They stripped down the B-29 bomber to its shell to reduce weight and began practising hair-raisingly tight mid-air turns that would be needed to reach a safe distance once the bomb was away.

On 5 August, having been relocated to Tinian, they were called together for a final briefing. They were informed they were about to do the job for which they had trained for so long: to drop a bomb unlike anything that had gone before. The word atomic remained unspoken.

After the briefing, they were ordered to get some sleep. Instead Van Kirk, Tibbets and Ferebee sat up all night playing poker. "I mean, they tell you you were about to go out and drop the first atom bomb that night, and then tell you to get some sleep! That was absolutely beyond me!"

'Bomb away'

The Enola Gay – named by Tibbets after his mother – took off on 6 August at 2.45am. Van Kirk's role was navigator: "We did things the old-fashioned way: celestial navigation, telling your position by the stars. We had a dome up top of the plane to sit up in and shoot the stars with a bubble sextant."

Despite the basic techniques, Van Kirk navigated the Enola Gay to its target 1,800 miles away, 15 seconds later than scheduled. "Fifteen seconds was damn good, that's all I can say."

He pulls out from one of the many boxes in his study a facsimile of the navigator's log he kept that day. The entry at 09.15 (8.15am Japanese time) reads "Bomb Away". Forty-three seconds later, Little Boy exploded, some 580m above the streets of Hiroshima.

When the bomb dropped, the Enola Gay suddenly lurched upwards, and Tibbets sent the plane into a 150-degree turn. "We were just levelling out with throttles full forward when the bomb exploded at our back. All we see is a bright flash like a photographer's bulb going off in the aeroplane." Within seconds of that, the first shock wave hit the plane. "There was a hell of a jolt. The sound was like the aeroplane being torn in half."

On the ground, of course, the jolt was far greater than the 3.5 Gs Van Kirk and his 11 colleagues felt inside the Enola Gay. The *pika-don*, or "flash-bang", as the Japanese call the impact of the atom bomb, ripped through Hiroshima with a force equivalent to 13 kilotons of TNT, razing almost five square miles of the city. Estimates vary, but it is thought that more than 70,000 people, most of them civilians, died within seconds of the blast, 140,000 by the end of 1945 and more than 230,000 in total. Many died in hideous ways, including burns and radiation sickness.

'You always knew people would be very seriously hurt'

It would be wrong to hold Van Kirk, now 89, in any sense responsible for the extreme human suffering that the bomb caused. As Harry Truman, the president who ordered the dropping of the bomb, told Tibbets when they met in 1948: "I'm the guy who sent you. If anybody gives you a hard time about it, refer them to me."

But on a personal level, how has Van Kirk coped over the years with the knowledge of the destruction the bomb yielded? I begin by asking him whether he had any thoughts, at the moment the bomb exploded, about the thousands of people who were right then being obliterated.

"You do that thinking beforehand. You knew that when you were bombing over occupied France, over Africa; you always knew that when you were dropping bombs out of aeroplanes a lot of people on the ground would be very seriously hurt."

And civilians? Most of the Hiroshima victims were civilians.

"You've heard of 'Bomber' Harris," he replies, referring to the RAF commander who ordered the raid that obliterated the German city of Dresden. "The idea at the time was to destroy a nation's will to fight, and you weren't dropping bombs in a pickle barrel, for chrissakes. You always recognised there were people on the ground – workers in a factory or civilians living nearby – who could be killed or damaged by the bombs."

And how difficult was that for him to deal with?

"If you could not deal with that you were worthless as an aviator. You had to separate that in your mind or else you were no good. You couldn't have done the job. Tibbets and Ferebee and I, we always agreed on this: the will of the United States at the time was that we drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima."

He pauses, and then he adds: "I've never found a way to fight a war without killing people. If you ever find that out, let me know."

Van Kirk says he never lost a night's sleep over Hiroshima. Such lack of anguish is testament, as he says himself, to the training that he received in the US air force that shielded its pilots from introspection. It is testament too, perhaps, to the ability of man – and all 12 crew members of the Enola Gay were men – to compartmentalise extreme events and emotions and thereby neutralise them.

'All you saw was plain, flat, level ground'

A few days after Japan surrendered, Van Kirk, Tibbets and some of the other crew visited Nagasaki which, on 9 August, had become the second city to have been eviscerated by an atomic bomb. I ask him what he recalls about the trip.

"Nothing. It was just a trip to Japan, that's all."

I can't believe that, I say. Nagasaki had just been entirely flattened by a nuclear explosion.

"Yes, we saw a city that was completely levelled. All you saw was plain, flat, level ground."

That must have been a powerful sight, I say.

"There was not much difference between an atomic bomb and a conventional bomb. The difference was in the area that it covered."

Did he see the shadows of people who had been burned to dust on the walls and pavements?

"Yes, you saw that."

And wasn't that shocking?

"It was shocking as you wondered how the heat of that bomb had done something like that. But you were immune to it because they told you during your training that would happen."

Have you ever allowed yourself to read accounts of what it was like to be at the receiving end of the bomb?

"Yes."

And what was your reaction?

"An information reaction."

Did he ever wish he had never taken part in the Enola Gay's atomic mission?

"No, I was proud to be on the Enola Gay. The war ended on 14 August. I don't know when it would have ended if we had not dropped the atomic bombs."

Would you do it again?

"Under the same circumstances – and I realise you can never have them exactly again – yes, I would do it again."

There is a slightly rehearsed quality to the answers Van Kirk gives, which is perhaps unsurprising as he has been responding to questions like this for almost 65 years. But he suspects he won't have to face such grilling for very much longer. The last man standing who is able to describe the experience of dropping the world's first atomic bomb is facing his own mortality.

"Every time one of my fellow crew members died it was a shock," he says. "But when the last one died it was a real shock. It's not just that I'm now the last survivor. It's the shock of getting old. Hell, I'm 89! The fact of the matter is we are all getting old and dying. That's all there is to it."