



THE SAGA OF THE SECOND BOMBER: *BOCKSCAR*

OCTOBER IN AVIATION HISTORY

On the day that the *Bockscar* (V-77) was scheduled to drop the bomb on the Japanese city of Kokura, she was instead piloted by a crew from one of her other sisters, *The Great Artiste*. Throughout the month of August up to the date of the bombing, this crew had been piloting Victor-77 for dry runs of atomic devices. Meanwhile, *Bockscar's* crew piloted *The Great Artiste*. This was largely due to the other crew having more training hours dropping test atomic devices. Most of these bombs were conventional versions of the Fat Man bomb that were dropped on industrial targets on mainland Japan. Both aircraft flew the mission the day of the bombing.

On the morning of 9 AUG, *Bockscar* took to the skies with five additional aircraft: *The Great Artiste*, *Enola Gay*, *Laggin' Dragon*, *Big Stink*, and *Full House*. MAJ Charles Sweeny was at the controls. *Full House*, *The Great Artiste*, and the *Enola Gay* had all flown the mission on 6 AUG as well. The flight took off from Tinian at 0349 local time and made their way to their original target destination of Kokura. Just prior to takeoff, some technical problems were noted aboard *Bockscar*, however it was determined that they were not mission impactful. Along with the fact that the bomb was already armed, it was decided that *Full House*, the alternative carrier, would not be tasked to carry the bomb to its destination.

MAJ Sweeny and his crew made it to the destination of Kokura just after 0800, but due to a delayed rendezvous with the other B-29's, lost their window to drop the bomb on the intended target. Poor visibility due to weather made Kokura a poor or otherwise unpredictable target for the crew. By this time, *Bockscar* had greatly exceeded her fuel capacity for the mission.

Holding patterns also gave Japanese anti-aircraft defenses time to wake up and begin a barrage. As a result, the attack on Kokura was scrapped after 0900.

The flight to Nagasaki was only twenty minutes long, and due to the dwindling nature of fuel reserves it was decided that a bombing run on this secondary target would prove to be more beneficial than totally withdrawing. *Bockscar* would not have been able to make it back to base with a full payload at this stage. Poor visibility over Nagasaki resulted in the decision to be made to use radar to bomb the target, but last-minute breaks in the clouds just before 1100 allowed for a visual tallyho on the primary bombing site. At 1101 local time, *Bockscar* dropped the Fat Man payload, which exploded forty-three seconds later less than two miles off target center. The resulting 21 KT explosion destroyed approximately 44 percent of the city.

The original plan called for *Bockscar* to return to Tinian, but problems with fuel and instruments subsequently forced the plane to land at Yontan on Okinawa. Emergency flares were used as the crew prepared for an undeclared emergency landing. By the time MAJ Sweeny navigated his aircraft onto the landing strip, two engines had died from fuel starvation, and a third was failing. Had the initial landing attempt failed, the aircraft would have been lost.

In November of 1945, *Bockscar* returned to the mainland U.S. from the Pacific Theater. However, her atomic mission had not ended. In subsequent years she was used in Operation Crossroads as an atomic observation aircraft. By the end of 1946, *Bockscar* had been pulled from live combat status

and put in reserve. For a period, she was on display as *The Great Artiste*. She remained at Davis-Monthan for fifteen years before being moved to Wright-Patterson where she remains today.

As for the rest of the 509th Composite Group, the formation of which *Bockscar*, *Enola Gay*, and thirteen other B-29's was part of, many iterations in mission set have occurred over the years. However, the 509th has retained its nuclear mission set through to the present day. The path of the lineage of the crews that ended the Pacific War finds itself today behind another iconic American legacy: the Stealth Bomber. Today, the 509th Operations Group pilots all the B-2 Spirit bombers out of Whiteman Air Force Base. The legacy continues...

REFERENCES

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1910	While in St. Louis, Missouri, President Theodore Roosevelt becomes the first president to fly.	11
1947	The Saber makes its first flight when World War II ace George Welch takes controls of the XF-86 for the first time.	01
1951	The 1st Pilotless Bomber Squadron is activated in Florida, shortly thereafter it becomes the first operational missile unit and is deployed to West Germany.	01
1969	A Cuban MiG-17 penetrates the U.S. Military Air Defense Network and lands at Homestead AFB in a defection mission.	05
2001	The U.S. launches the first major offensive operation in the Global War on Terror against the Taliban.	07

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