

# B-29 Hunters of the JAAF



Koji Takai & Henry Sakaida

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Series editor Tony Holmes

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# JAAF VERSUS THE 58th BW

**B**y 1944 the war had turned against the Japanese. And with the introduction of the Boeing B-29 Superfortress into the China-Burma-India (CBI) theatre, Japan's fate was sealed. XX Bomber Command sent the 58th Bombardment Wing (BW) to India to establish a rear base. From Calcutta, it would move to forward airfields in Chengtu, China, which were within striking distance of the Japanese mainland.

The Japanese High Command was aware of the new B-29s thanks to reports from the JAAF's 64th Sentai (air group), based in Burma, and the first skirmish was not long in coming. Capt Hideo Miyabe, commander of this famous fighter unit, was the first Japanese to attack the Superfortress, in a joint operation with the 204th Sentai.

On 26 April 1944, B-29 No 42-6330 of the 444th Bombardment Group (BG), piloted by Maj Charles Hansen, was at 16,000 ft over the China/India border when it was attacked by Ki-43 'Oscars'. During the half-hour engagement that followed, the B-29's top turret and 20 mm tail cannon failed, and Sgt Walter Gilonski, who was manning a side gun, was wounded. However, tail gunner Sgt Harold Lanahan, who was able to clear his twin 0.50-cal machine guns, thought he had scored a kill.

Meanwhile, Miyabe reported shooting out the B-29's right engine, and the Japanese claimed the aircraft was destroyed. As it happens, the B-29 went on its way with eight holes in it, while the Japanese pilots turned for home without any losses.

Intelligence in Tokyo correctly surmised that once the Americans had reached their forward bases in China, Japan could expect raids on its factories in northern Kyushu from across the East China Sea. Japanese commanders also believed the first attack would come at night, but not before the Americans had solved their supply problems.

B-29s, C-109s (converted B-24 tankers) and C-47 transports of the Air Transport Command made more than 1400 trips over the 'Hump', as the Himalayas were known, to bring supplies into China. Early-model B-29s had been stripped down to be used as bulk fuel carriers, and by June 1944 the Americans had amassed enough fuel, ordnance, supplies, aircrew and aircraft to take the war to the heart of enemy territory.

At 1616 hrs on 15 June, the first of the 58th BW's 68 B-29s took to the air from the wing's bases at Chengtu. Each aircraft carried a payload of only two tons for the mission, which saw the 58th targeting steel factories at Yawata, on the northern coast of Kyushu Island. Since the operation was very long-range, and fuel conservation was critical, it had been decided that each aircraft would make its own way to the target rather than fly in massed formations. Altitude would be between 8500-11,000 ft.

If the Americans were expecting the raid to be a surprise, they were mistaken, for Japanese army observers in China were quick to report the

unusual air activity they had detected to the Western Air Defence Command in Fukuoka, on the Japanese mainland. Early-warning radar on Cheju Island, off the south coast of Korea in the East China Sea, had picked up large numbers of aircraft.

Lt Tom Friedman, flying with the 40th BG as a radar counter-measures technician, listened on his equipment for signs of Japanese radar. A strong whining signal through his analyser told him they were being 'painted';

'We had been detected well back of the Chinese coast, and several hours from the target. As we neared the coast other signals came and increased in strength. It was an eerie feeling to know that far below, our every move was being carefully watched on scopes and plotting boards.'

The Japanese issued orders to scramble. That honour fell to the 4th Sentai, based at Ozuki airfield in western Honshu, and it would be the first unit to engage the Superfortresses over Japan. The 4th Sentai had briefly taken part in the invasion of the Philippines at the beginning of the war, and in January 1942 had returned to Ozuki for home defence duties over northern Kyushu.

The 4th was equipped with the twin-engined Kawasaki Ki-45 *Toryu* ('Dragon Slayer'). Codenamed 'Nick', the aircraft had been designed as a long-range fighter, but had failed to live up to expectations. However, it excelled in the ground-attack and nightfighter roles, the latter variant boasting a service ceiling of 10,000 m (32,810 ft) and a maximum speed of 540 kmh at 6000 m (335 mph at 19,685 ft). At this stage only eight

**Pilots and observers of the 3rd Chutai/4th Sentai salute their CO, Capt Masaji Kobayashi, at Ozuki airfield in January 1944. In the background are twin-engined 'Nicks'. The men were undergoing nightfighter training at the time (*Maru*)**



Capt Masaji Kobayashi holds a model of a Flying Fortress which he used to instruct his men. They also trained with the real thing, for the unit was supplied with an airworthy B-17E that had been captured in Java in early 1942. As the Americans set up their forward bases in China, the Japanese correctly deduced that the B-29s would attack northern Kyushu (*M Kobayashi*)

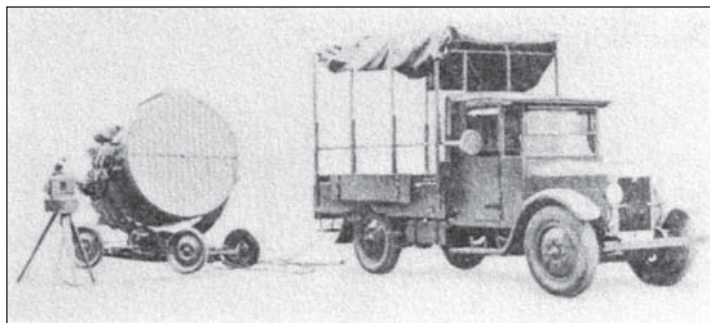


aircraft had been converted for nightfighting, six of these carrying conventional armaments of 20 mm and 13 mm guns, and two equipped with 37 mm cannon.

Expecting the enemy to attack under the cover of darkness, the unit began training its pilots in the specialised skills of nightfighting. Of its 40 pilots, only 15 were qualified to fly at night, and most of these had completed more than 500 hours of training.

To work out its tactics, the unit used a captured B-17E taken at Bandung, Java, in early 1942. Attacking the target head-on and from above was the method decided on, and aside from practising with the Flying Fortress, the unit also employed towed target banners as pilots familiarised themselves with performing co-ordinated attacks in conjunction with ground searchlight units.

Meanwhile, as the Superfortresses lumbered towards Yawata, the 4th Sentai scrambled 24 'Nicks' in flights of four aircraft. It did not matter that many of the pilots had completed only half their night training – they



Japanese searchlights were mobile, and powered by generators carried by their supporting Isuzu trucks

were thrown into the fighting along with the few veterans. They were in for a shock. To see the massive B-29 for the first time would have been an horrific experience for any home defence pilot. In his memoir, 1Lt Isamu Kashiide recorded his first impression of the mighty aircraft;

‘I was flying over the industrial area of northern Kyushu. The unit commander gave the order “Enemy planes invading an important area! Every flight attack!” At the same time, ground searchlights in the area lit up the sky.

‘Finally I sighted an enemy four-engined bomber. I was scared! It was known that the B-29 was a huge plane, but when I saw my opponent it was much larger than I had ever expected. There was no question that when compared with the B-17, the B-29 was indeed the “Superfortress”! The figure that appeared in the searchlight made me think of a great whale in the ocean. I was just astounded by its size.’

Sixty-two B-29s arrived at their destination, and at 2338 hrs (China time) they began dropping their 500-lb GP (general purpose) bombs. Due to 5/10ths cloud cover and a blackout over Yawata, only 15 Superfortresses bombed visually, while others dropped by radar – only one bomb landed on the intended target. Meanwhile, bomber crewmen reported that enemy attacks were weak, with only 12 passes being made within 500 yards. The B-29 gunners made no claims.

However, ineffective as the Japanese tactics might have seemed, the Americans did not return home unscathed, with *Limber Dugan* (42-6230) of the 468th BG becoming the first B-29 to be shot down over Japan. The successful pilot was WO Sadamitsu Kimura, who caught the Superfortress in the searchlights from below and started to attack.

‘I approached it to within 20 or 30 metres’, he recounted in the July 1944 edition of aviation magazine *Koku Shonen* (Flying Youth). ‘Suddenly, everything became white because of the reflected light off the big fuselage of the enemy plane, which filled my gunsight. It started to climb in fear of being rammed by me. I did not hesitate! I started to fire, and I could tell that I hit it. The nose came down slowly and it started to spin. I saw one piece of the fin come off.’

The 58th BW lost a total of seven B-29s on the mission. However, only one was shot down and six were operational losses. Flak damaged six others.

In their first nightfighting sortie, which lasted two hours, the pilots of the 4th Sentai claimed seven B-29s shot down and six damaged – over-enthusiasm which can be put down to a combination of darkness and confusion. Nevertheless, 28-year-old Sadamitsu Kimura was Japan’s hero of the night. He claimed to have shot down three B-29s, and for his feats of



1Lt Isamu Kashiide combs through the wreckage of *Limber Dugan* of the 468th BG (*Y Kumo*)



Another view of the wreckage of *Limber Dugan*. This aircraft was shot down over Wakamatsu, in northern Kyushu, by 2Lt Sadamitsu Kimura, flying a Ki-45 (*Y Kumo*)



daring was awarded a military sword from Army Minister Gen Hideki Tojo. The other supposed 'kills' were claimed by 1Lt Kashiide (two) and Capt Masaji Kobayashi and WO Hannoshin Nishio (one each). Only one 'Nick' was hit and damaged.

As far as the JAAF was concerned, the 37 mm cannon, and the pilots using them had proved themselves, especially considering the gun's limitations and lack of available ammunition. Isamu Kashiide commented;

'Our plane's nose was reconstructed to accommodate the gun, but it was limited and could only carry 15 rounds. The rate of fire was three shots

**Pilots of the 4th Sentai are interviewed by a newspaper reporter (back towards camera) on the afternoon of 16 June 1944. The previous night B-29s from the 58th BW had raided northern Kyushu, and men from this sentai had attempted to repel them over Yawata. They are clockwise, Capt Masaji Kobayashi, Maj Isao Abe (CO of the unit), Chief of Staff of the 19th Air Brigade, 1Lt Isamu Kashiide, WO Sadamitsu Kimura and Capt Toshio Sassa (Y Watanabe)**



**These five pilots of the 4th Sentai would make names for themselves in the battles against the B-29s. Standing, left to right, are Sgts Shigeo Nobe, Hannoshin Nishio and Shinji Mori. Sitting, left to right, are Sgt Minoru Uchida and 1Lt Isamu Kashiide (via H Sakaida)**

1Lt Isamu Kashiide in his high-altitude flying gear – the fur-lined suit was electrically heated. In his post-war memoir, Kashiide claimed an incredible 26 B-29 victories, plus seven kills against the Soviets in the 1939 border skirmish at Nomonhan. His B-29 tally is disputed by his former colleagues and historians, and his true score is believed to be around seven (via *H Sakaida*)

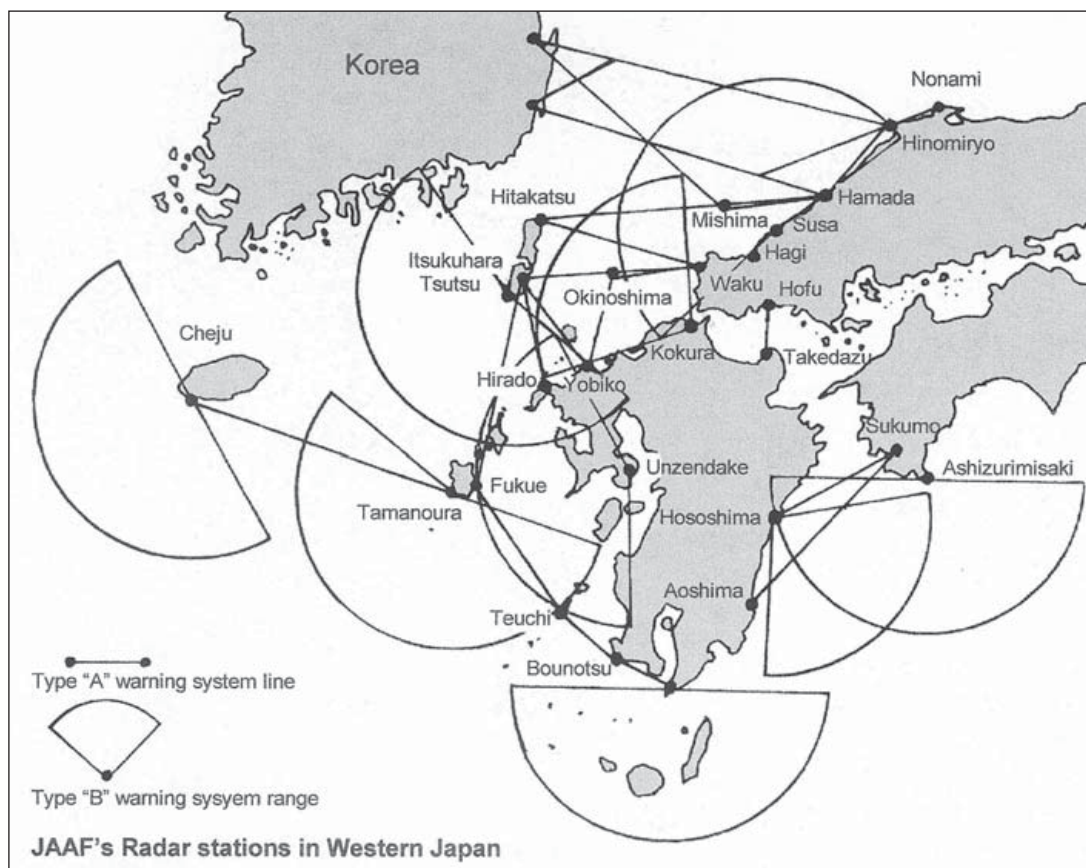


per minute. Unlike the machine gun, it could not be freely manipulated. Sadly lacking were essential war supplies. “One shot, one kill” became our attitude. Every shot had to count.’

### FIRST RAMMING ATTACK

On 20 August, four groups from XX Bomber Command (40th, 444th, 462nd and 468th), comprising 76 aircraft, took off from their bases in China. They were led by Col Howard Engler, commander of the 468th, with Brig Gen Saunders, the strike commander, coming along to observe. Each B-29 carried one-and-a-half tons of 500-lb GPs intended for the iron and steel factories at Yawata.

Within minutes of take-off the Japanese were alerted, for once again the early-warning radar stations had detected the approach of massed formations. At 1632 hrs the Western Air Defence Command put out a warning of an air raid, and the Japanese army’s 4th, 51st, 52nd and 59th Sentais were scrambled to intercept.



The 51st Sentai was equipped with the Nakajima Ki-84 *Hayate* ('Frank') fighter at its base at Hofu airfield, Honshu. It was a relatively new unit, set up in April 1944 at the same time as the 52nd Sentai, which was also equipped with the 'Frank'. The 59th from Ashiya – proud veterans of the Khalkin Gol Incident in May 1939 (when the Soviet Union and Japan clashed over the disputed border between Manchuria and Outer Mongolia), as well as the China War and the CBI – sported the sleek Kawasaki Ki-61 *Hien* ('Tony').

Together, these four army air groups had 89 fighters with which to tackle the B-29s. In addition, the Japanese Navy's 352nd and Omura Kokutais (air groups) also scrambled their fighters.

The Superfortresses, now 67 strong, were flying in threes and fours, and arrived at Yawata at between 20,000 and 26,000 ft. They were greeted by intense anti-aircraft fire. The honour of dropping the first bomb was given to Maj Donald J Humphrey's *POSTVILLE EXPRESS* (42-6279). Aboard the aircraft was Brig Gen Saunders and several war correspondents and photographers.

'Betty! Betty! Betty!' shouted the radioman, signalling to base that bombs were dropping on Japan. Other aircraft began dropping their loads too. Anti-aircraft guns dotted the sky with puffs of smoke, and *Ready Teddy* (42-6408) from the 468th fell, while eight others were damaged. After running through the gauntlet of flak, at 1632 hrs the Americans were faced with enemy fighters coming at them with a vengeance.

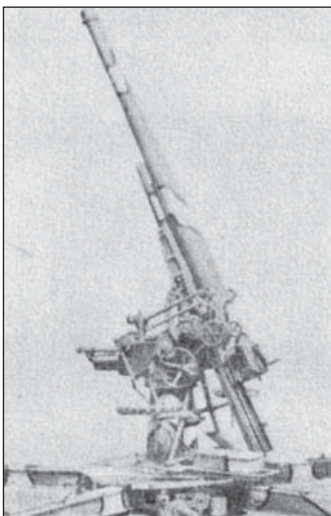
**Japanese radar stations proved effective in detecting the advance of B-29s towards western Japan. A network of ground observation posts in China also sent information of B-29 movements prior to the aircraft clearing the coast**

Although bomber gunners reported some 50 fighters, there were actually more than double this number.

Col Robert Clinkscales of the 468th was leading his four-aircraft diamond formation in *Gertrude C* (42-6334), which was named after his mother. On the opening day of the war, Clinkscales had been co-pilot of the famed B-17 *The Swoose*. He later became Gen Douglas MacArthur's personal pilot, ferrying him around in an ex-Royal Australian Air Force DC-2. When the 58th BW was formed, he was one of the combat veterans selected for a leadership position. On this particular mission he had taken someone special along for the ride – with him in the cockpit was 'Sally', his cocker spaniel.

The 4th Sentai's 1Lt Isamu Kashiide, and his subordinate Sgt Shigeo Nobe, approached the large bomber formations in a head-on run. As Kashiide lined up an opponent with his 37 mm gun, Nobe, who was flying to his right, took a spontaneous decision and radioed that he was going to ram. Also in the aircraft was the rear-seat gunner, Sgt Denzo Takagi.

'Don't be hasty!' yelled Kashiide. But it was too late. Nobe was going to bring down his enemy at any cost. *Gertrude C* had just released its bombs



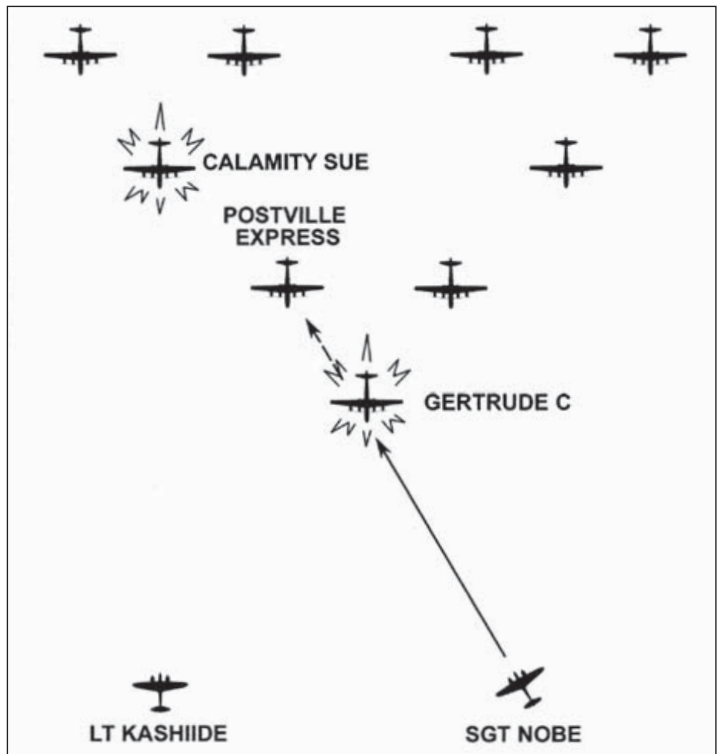
The 7.5 cm Type 88 anti-aircraft gun had a range of about 9000 m, although it was not accurate at such distances. Indeed, it was usually a lucky hit that brought down a B-29

Four pilots of the 468th BG who flew on the mission to Yawata on 20 August 1944. They are, from left to right, Col James V Edmundson, Col Robert Clinkscales, holding 'Sally', and Maj's Don Humphrey and James Van Horn (*Don Humphrey*)





Pilots of the 4th Sentai are briefed at Ozuki in the spring of 1944. Sitting in the foreground, from left to right, are Sgt Minoru Uchida, 1Lt Isamu Kashiide and Sgt Shigeo Nobe. All three of these pilots would achieve multiple scores against the B-29 (via H Sakaida)



This diagram shows the collision course of Sgt Shigeo Nobe with Col Robert Clinkscales' *Gertrude C*. A tight formation contributed to the loss of two B-29s in the ramming attack