

1945 July 30-August 5

Superfortresses Over Japan

By the beginning of August 1945, the noose was tightening around Japan. Its Pacific empire had shrunk considerably from its expansive conquests in three years earlier. Allied ground and naval forces had island-hopped through the Central and Southwest Pacific taking islands and bypassing others until they were less than 1000 miles from Japan. Allied submarines and aircraft were cutting off Japan's overseas supply lines, while, at the same time, the Japanese home islands were being pounded by air and naval forces.

A major weapon in the bombardment of Japan was the Boeing B-29 Superfortress heavy bomber. The B-29 was the brainchild of [United States Army Air Force General Henry Arnold](#) in November 1939. He wanted a heavy bomber that could fly faster, higher, farther, and carry a heavier bomb load than an existing bomber in the inventory. Although it was originally aimed at combating Germany, by 1943 it was evident that the B-29 would be used exclusively against Japan.¹

Boeing's B-29 Superfortress was the largest and most advanced bomber of its time.



Boeing B-29 Superfortress

(Aviation History Online Museum)

Wingspan: 141 feet, 3 inches
Length: 99 feet

Height: 29 feet, 7 inches

Weight: 141,000 pounds (loaded)

Engines: 4 eighteen-cylinder engines generating 2,200 horsepower each

Speed: 358 miles per hour at 25,000 feet

Ceiling: 31,850 feet

Armament: One 20mm cannon and 10 machine guns

Bomb load: 20,000 pounds²

Crew: 11 (pilot, co-pilot, navigator, bombardier, radar operator, flight engineer, radio operator, and four gunners)³

It was innovative in several ways. The B-29 had new engines, pressurized crew stations, and remote-controlled guns.⁴ Every moving piece of equipment in a B-29, except for the hydraulic braking system, was controlled by an electric motor or a cable.⁵ The radar operator was able to direct bombing through clouds or overcast skies with the radar. The Army Air Force motion picture unit had prepared films based on captured maps of Japan, reconnaissance photos, and "the observations of an air force officer who had visited Japan as a tourist." Starting with models of the target areas, they then added cloud density and appearance for every strategic area of Japan. The resulting motion picture films showed the radar operators what their targets would look like through their radar scopes.⁶

The first B-29s started showing up on American bases in July 1943.⁷ During testing and its early deployment, the Superfortress was plagued by mechanical bugs and the tendency of its engines to catch fire. But it overcame these problems to become "the most formidable air weapon of the war."⁸

These new war weapons required a highly-trained crew of eleven men each. One of those men was **Albert Larsen of West Salem.**



Albert Larsen in 1935
(*The Mariner*, West Salem High School Class of 1935 yearbook)

Larsen was born in West Salem on June 26, 1917, the only son of William and Ella (Seeger) Larsen. He had a younger sister named Alice Mae. Larsen was a popular student in West Salem grade school and high school. The kid that everyone knew as "Abbie" was described as having a "pleasant disposition and unfailing good nature" and "higher than average intellectual capacities." Larsen graduated from West Salem High School in 1935.⁹

He went to college after high school and began a career as a teacher. Larsen earned a bachelor's degree from La Crosse State Teachers College in 1939, and then he obtained a Master's Degree at the University of Wisconsin one year later. Larsen started the 1940-1941 school year as a science teacher and director of the high school band at Bigfork, Minnesota.¹⁰ Bigfork is a very small town in northeastern Minnesota.

Larsen's teaching career ended abruptly in April 1941 when he was inducted into the Army Air Force. As an enlisted man, he trained at Sheppard Field in Texas and was stationed at Scott Field in Illinois and Boca Raton, Florida. In January 1944, Larsen was commissioned as a second lieutenant in Miami, Florida.¹¹

The same year he was inducted into the Army, Albert Larsen married Dorothy Gilles on December 27, 1941, at the St. Mary's Church in Bangor.¹² After Albert was sent overseas, Dorothy lived with her parents in Bangor, Mr. and Mrs. George Gilles.¹³

Larsen was home on leave for Thanksgiving in November 1944. Then he returned to Miami.¹⁴

In January 1945, Larsen was promoted to first lieutenant at his duty station at Boca Raton, Florida.¹⁵

After four months of training, B-29 bomber crews were ready to go to war.¹⁶ The same month he was promoted to first lieutenant, Larsen and his crew boarded a C-47 cargo plane for a very long trip to India.¹⁷ Their first stop was Brazil, and then it was the long flight across the Atlantic Ocean to Africa. After a stop in Morocco, they continued across the Sahara Desert to Cairo, Egypt. From there they flew on to a B-29 bomber base in India.¹⁸

Larsen was a radar officer on a B-29 in the 20th bomber command, and his crew flew between India and China. In a letter he wrote to his parents on January 9, 1945 (received by them on January 20), after a flight to China, he said:

I wish I could half describe the conditions in China to you . . . You couldn't believe it if I told you. The people are cheerful and smiling. They have few clothes. Their houses are now falling down and they thatch the broken down parts and make lean-tos to live in. And it's cold there. I wear fur-lined flying boots and my feet are cold. They wear straw sandals or go barefoot. Yet they smile and give you a cheerful 'Hubba Hao,' which means, 'How goes it?' and we answer 'Ding Hao,' or 'good.' Always the smile. Even little children of these poor devils (they've never heard of plumbing) are polite and cheerful. There seems to be no smart Aleck age in China.

Larsen closed his letter with requests for some camera film, summer sausage, cookies, letters from home, and a subscription order for the West Salem newspaper.¹⁹

On one of his missions flown from India, a piece of shrapnel grazed Larsen's head. This earned him the Purple Heart medal for being wounded in action.²⁰



(Military Machine)

B-29s operated from India, China, and the Mariana Islands in the Pacific Theater. The first Superfortresses arrived in India on April 2, 1944. They flew their first mission about a month later over Bangkok. In May 1944, B-29s were able to start operating from a new runway in China. The first bombing mission of Japan originated from here on June 15, 1944. When the Mariana Islands were liberated in August 1944, five runways to accommodate 900 B-29 bombers were built there. In November of 1944, B-29s from the Marianas flew their first bombing raid over Tokyo.²¹



(National Air and Space Museum)

High-altitude, targeted bombing raids in daylight against military installations and factories in Japan were not effective. One reason was the high winds over Japan that scattered the falling bombs.

[Major General Curtis LeMay](#) took over command of the 21st Bomb Group at Guam on January 19, 1945.²² General LeMay decided to switch to low-altitude strikes at night dropping firebombs on Japanese cities crowded with highly flammable structures to kill the people who worked in the war factories.²³ The first of these devastating raids was on Tokyo just after midnight on March 10, 1945. Hundreds of B-29s from bases in the Mariana Islands dropped hundreds of thousands of incendiary bombs on a working-class section of the city. In a six-hour period, about 100,000 Japanese died in a firestorm caused by the bombing.²⁴



Tokyo after a B-29 firebombing on 1945 March 10

(*New York Times Magazine*, 2020 March 10)

These B-29 firebombings hit more than 60 cities before the war ended.²⁵ Because the Japanese had few night fighters and inferior radar, the American B-29s flew missions without guns and ammunition so they could carry more firebombs. The B-29s flew over their targets in a single file at five thousand feet dropping napalm and oil bombs.²⁶ Starting at the end of March, B-29s also laid 12,049 mines in Japanese waters to disrupt shipping.²⁷

In mid-May 1945, 1st Lt. Albert Larsen of West Salem had been transferred to an island in the Pacific Ocean, so he participated in bombing raids on Japan flown from these bases.²⁸

Throughout the summer of 1945, page 1 headlines in the *La Crosse Tribune* detailed the systematic destruction of Japanese cities.

- 500 Superforts Spray Incendiaries On Nagoya (1945 May 14)
- Tokyo Seared By 550 Superforts (1945 May 24)
- Business Districts of Tokyo Burn (1945 May 25)
- Metropolitan Tokyo Destroyed (1945 May 26)
- Osaka Seared By 550 Superforts (1945 June 15)

- 800 American Planes Hit Japan (1945 July 5)
- 5 Japanese Targets Set Afire Like 'Terrific Tropical Sunset' (1945 July 7)
- 1,500 U.S. Planes Hammer Japan (1945 July 10)
- Bomb-Battered Japan Fears Return Of Yank Sky Armada (1945 July 11)
- Pour 4,000 Tons Of Fire Bombs On 5 Jap Centers (1945 July 20)
- 2,000 Planes Sweep Over Japan (1945 July 24)
- Japs Told When And Where Next Superfort Blows Will Fall (1945 July 27)
- War's Record Raid Unleashed On Japs (1945 August 2)
- Blockade Of Japan By B-29s 'Complete' (1945 August 3)

The scope of the August 2 raids on Japan was expressed in some staggering numbers. Five Japanese cities were hit by 820 B-29s from midnight to 3:00 a.m. The planes were crewed by 9,000 men and supported by 45,000 ground crewmen. The bomber force was loaded with 5,330,000 gallons of aviation gasoline and flew a combined 2,460,000 miles. All the planes lined up nose-to-tail would have been 18 miles long.²⁹



B-29s at Tinian in the Mariana Islands

(*Union Bulletin*, Walla Walla, Washington, 2018 October 21)

During World War II, B-29 Superfortresses flew more than 100,000,000 miles on 32,612 missions. That is the equivalent of more than 200 round trips to the moon.³⁰

By the end of the war, Radio Tokyo admitted that less than thirty percent of the homes in Tokyo were still standing. Sixty-three percent of the city's population had left Tokyo. Almost 10,000,000 Japanese were killed, injured, or made homeless because of the bombings.³¹

Besides the bomb damage they inflicted on ground targets, B-29s destroyed or damaged 1,935 Japanese planes in the air and 350 more on the ground.³² From June 1944 until the end of the war, B-29s had dropped 177,000 tons of explosives. One author provided this insight: "During the entire ground war on the islands in the Pacific, Allied forces inflicted 760,000 combat casualties on Japanese troops. By comparison, during the nine-month air war over the Japanese mainland, B-29 Bombers out of the Marianas inflicted 806,000 casualties, of which 330,000 were deaths."³³

These results did not come without a cost. In a year of operations over Japan, 437 B-29s were lost in combat. There were also a considerable number of planes lost to non-combat causes. Although more than 600 downed B-29 crewmen were rescued by naval submarines, ships, and aircraft, more than 3,000 were killed.³⁴

Tuesday, June 26, 1945, would have been Lt. Albert Larsen's 28th birthday. On that day, his wife, Dorothy, received a telegram from the War Department stating that her husband had been killed in action on May 29, 1945. She had lost her husband; their 13-month-old daughter, Judith Ann, had lost her father; and William and Ella Larsen had lost their only son. Albert Larsen was the first man from the village of West Salem to be killed in action in World War II. The telegram stated that more details would follow.³⁵

Larsen's commanding officer sent a letter to Dorothy Larsen in early August 1945.

Lt. Albert Larsen Killed in Mission Over Japan, Recent Letter Reveals

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The following is an excerpt from a letter recently received by Mrs. Albert Larsen in which her husband's commanding officer states some of the details of her husband's death.

"First Lt. Albert J. Larsen was killed in action on the 29th of May, 1945, in action while on a mission over the mainland of Japan. After bombing the city of Yokohama, Japan, the B-29 in which he was flying was forced down in the ocean shortly after leaving the target area. The crew abandoned the airplane and the survivors were unable to rescue your husband. With a great loss that we all feel deeply we can only honor his superb service. On his Asiatic Pacific Theatre ribbon are three bronze stars for campaigns in which he and his squadron participated. He was awarded the Purple Heart for wounds received in action. The Award of the Air Medal and his Certificate for Meritorious Achievement were his proud possessions. These are small tokens but they are important as a humble effort to give tribute to a

task well done.

Signed: Robert C. Root,
Major—Air Corps, Commanding.



1st Lt. Albert Larsen

(*The Nonpareil Journal*, West Salem, Wisconsin, 1945 August 9, page 4)

His commanding officer, Major Robert Root, also wrote:

Although your husband had been with us only six months he was almost immediately the friend of us all. I met Albert in the squadron dining hall and recall how favorably he impressed me that first meeting. There was a warmth in his smile which he always shared and as our service brought us closer together his subtle humor and sincere manner added a freshness to every conversation. As a combat officer he experienced the attendant risks and hardships. Despite this he never lost his generosity or sensitive understanding of men. This deep understanding and interest in his fellowmen, the ability to inspire and the example he set for others made your husband an outstanding officer. He was our good friend whom we all respected, admired and liked.

I hope you will find comfort in knowing your husband has been instrumental in driving the war-making nations to unconditional submission so that peace and freedom may be a reality in our time.³⁶

At the end of 1946, the University of Wisconsin dedicated the new [Truax Field student housing project](#) for veterans. Forty-six of the units were named for the University of Wisconsin alumni who were killed in World War II, one of them being Albert John Larsen, Class of 1940.³⁷

A total of 4,281 B-29 Superfortresses were built during World War II. B-29 bombers saw action in the Korean War where they flew 42,000 combat hours. The last B-29 was retired in November 1954.³⁸

At the time, firebombing Japanese cities by B-29s was seen as just a tactic to inflict maximum punishment on the Japanese and convince them to surrender. There was little or no sympathy for the Japanese who, after all, had started the war with their sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. Japanese atrocities against civilians and prisoners of war were well-known. Their suicide planes had crashed into American ships and taken many lives. In later years, the morality of firebombing cities has been widely debated.

In early August 1945, two B-29s would play an important role in air raids on Japan that would be even more controversial.

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Sources & Notes:

¹ Edward Jablonski, *Airwar: Outraged Skies/Wings of Fire* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 127.

² Enzo Angelucci, *The Rand McNally Encyclopedia of Military Aircraft 1914-1980* (New York: The Military Press, 1983), 273.

³ Andrew W. Waters, *The U.S. Air Force Airplanes, 1907-1983* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1983), 99.

⁴ Jablonski, 127.

⁵ "B-29 Parts Electrified," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 August 16, page 1.

⁶ "Army Air Force Radar Moving Pictures Guided Superforts To Japanese Targets," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 August 19, page 6.

⁷ Waters, 98.

⁸ Jablonski, 127.

⁹ "Lt. Albert J. Larsen Killed May 29 in South Pacific," *The Nonpareil-Journal*, West Salem, Wisconsin, 1945 June 28, page 1.

¹⁰ *The Nonpareil-Journal*, 1945 June 28.

¹¹ *The Nonpareil-Journal*, 1945 June 28.

¹² *The Nonpareil-Journal*, 1945 June 28.

¹³ "Bangor Girl's Husband Is Killed In Action," *Bangor Independent*, Bangor, Wisconsin, 1945 June 28, page 1. This article states that Larsen entered the Army in April 1942 and went overseas in November 1944. This differs from the dates for these events shown in the West Salem newspaper, which have been used in this article.

¹⁴ "Chinese Go Barefoot in Cold, Lt. Larsen Writes after Flight between India, China," *The Nonpareil-Journal*, West Salem, Wisconsin, 1945 January 25, page 1.

¹⁵ *The Nonpareil-Journal*, 1945 June 28.

¹⁶ "Answers To Questions," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 June 7, page 6.

¹⁷ *The Nonpareil-Journal*, 1945 June 28.

¹⁸ *The Nonpareil-Journal*, 1945 January 25.

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- ¹⁹ *The Nonpareil-Journal*, 1945 January 25.
- ²⁰ *The Nonpareil-Journal*, 1945 June 28.
- ²¹ Waters, 99. The B-29 that led this first raid on Tokyo, "Dauntless Dottie," flew 53 missions in the Pacific Theater. It crashed shortly after taking off from Kwajalein, bound for Hawaii, with 13 men on board who had completed their combat tours and were returning home. Among the ten men killed in the crash was Pfc. Lowell B. Spivey of Windsor, North Carolina, who was being sent home to non-hazardous duty because two of his brothers had already been killed in action. "10 Perish As Famed 'Dauntless Dottie' Crashes In Pacific," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 July 9, page 2.
- ²² Waters, 99.
- ²³ A similar strategy was employed by the British against Germany in World War II. While the American Army Air Force conducted daylight bombing raids against specific targets, the British used saturation bombing at night against German cities. Their strategy was to destroy the homes and disrupt the lives of the German citizenry and kill the people who worked in armaments factories.
- ²⁴ John Ismay, "'We Hated What We Were Doing': Veterans Recall Firebombing Japan," *New York Times Magazine*, 2020 March 10, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/09/magazine/we-hated-what-we-were-doing-veterans-recall-firebombing-japan.html>.
- ²⁵ Ismay.
- ²⁶ Jablonski, 169.
- ²⁷ "Superfort Operations Cost 3,000 Yank Lives In Year," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 August 17, page 2.
- ²⁸ *The Nonpareil-Journal*, 1945 June 28.
- ²⁹ "Here's What It Takes For A Big Raid On Japan," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 August 2, page 1.
- ³⁰ "Why B-29 Superfort Men Are Proud Of Their Record," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 August 23, page 10.
- ³¹ "30% Of Tokyo Homes Standing, Says Radio," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 August 26, page 1.
- ³² *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 August 17.
- ³³ Waters, 100.
- ³⁴ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 August 17.
- ³⁵ *The Nonpareil-Journal*, 1945 June 28.
- ³⁶ "Letter Tells How Lt. A. J. Larsen Met Death," *Bangor Independent*, Bangor, Wisconsin, 1945 August 2, page 1.
- ³⁷ "University To Honor Heroes," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1946 December 8, page 16. The other local man honored was Francis Riley of La Crosse, who was killed in North Africa on February 14, 1943.
- ³⁸ Waters, 100.

For some video of the B-29 Superfortress, see:

Birth of the Boeing B-29 Superfortress - 1945 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHYhpeXAggc>(link is external)

Flying the B-29 Superfortress (1944) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtpHQ6FZ9sY>(link is external)

Crawl through a B-29 Superfortress IN FLIGHT! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XakK81edKFA>(link is external)

FIRST B-29 RAID ON JAPAN TARGET TOKYO 1945 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rj-DclAxCcc>(link is external)