

THE DAY WORLD WAR THREE ALMOST STARTED

ARMY OF OCCUPATION
USAAF 3RD ATTACK GROUP ATSUGI AIRFIELD, JAPAN

By Gene Ryan and Lloyd Barnard
June 18, 1946

The following is Gene Ryan's recall of the event:

It is nine months since World War II ended with the surrender of the Japanese aboard the battleship Missouri and Lloyd and I are both awaiting our turn to go home. I was an officer assigned to the 8th Squadron for flying an also to Headquarters Squadron for various other duties. Lloyd was an enlisted man trained as a B-29 gunner assigned to 13th Squadron but since all gunners had to have an additional job his MOS was changed to Medical Technician and he was working in the infirmary with the Group Flight Surgeon as NCO in charge of the dispensary. We both arrived at Atsugi in December 1945, Lloyd as a replacement out of the States, and I out of 439th Squadron, 319th Bomb Group after a short period of duty with 375th Troop Carrier at Tachikawa, Japan. The 3rd Attack was a light bomber group flying the Douglas A-26 Invader. The Group also had a squadron that flew the B-24 Liberator for weather reporting.

It is mid-summer, hot and muggy, but the the terrible muddy roads are gone. Also gone are most of the A-26 pilots, (replaced by four engine pilots that had no tactical training in the A-26), and the bombardiers and navigators that were declared surplus in April. The lack of navigators folded the B-24 squadron that could not fly the long weather missions without guidance from a navigator. Other personnel shortages existed, including crew chiefs, armorer, other people essential for proper maintenance of the aircraft. The aircraft were in poor condition.

In April the peacetime army arrived in the form of a Colonel out of the training command. Now there was close-order drill, a dress code, saluting, parades and inspections. But the thing missing was training, on the ground or in the air.. I had not fired a shot, fired a rocket, or dropped a practice bomb in nine months. There was no ground school regarding the aircraft weapons systems, fuel systems, engines or anything else. The 3rd was a shadow of its former self.

On the night of the June 18th I was in the Officers Club drinking beer and playing poker, the usual thing each evening. It was shortly before midnight when the operations officer came in and announced that a Russian fleet was making a run at the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido. He went on to say the 3rd would launch a striking force at dawn. The ground officers, armament, maintenance and the like, rushed out to prepare the airplanes and load bombs and ammunition. The rest of us who were going flying switched to coffee.

Down at the airfield things were not going smoothly. The few airplanes that were flyable needed fueling. They found bombs, but no fuses. For the guns there were GP rounds and tracers, but no armor piercing. If any rockets were available I don't remember seeing them. We were totally unprepared, on the ground and in the air.

At dawn we launched. Being one of the few that had any real training and some combat I was on the COs wing. There was about a dozen A-26s and we picked up about a half dozen P-51s for escort. This flight constituted the total available air force in the western Pacific. As we headed north-west to engage the Russians I was wondering if the guns would fire or if the bombs would explode. I decided I would not see any vessel larger and a destroyer.

We were about an hour out (my Form 5 shows a flight of one hour and 55 minutes on June 19) when our flight turned around somewhere north of Sendai to fly back to Atsugi. Apparently the Russians had picked us up on radar, turned the fleet around and headed back to their port.

This experience convinced me that I was through as a military pilot.

The following is Lloyd Barnard's recall of the event:

I only vaguely remember the incident you speak of but have a unique memory jogger and record of events. My mother kept every letter I ever wrote to her from the day I was born 'till she died. Thinking maybe some child or grandchild would enjoy or appreciate them I have transcribed them. Here is a portion of a letter dated 19 June 1946...

"We went to Tokyo last night for the first time in weeks, we got back around one-thirty. At three-thirty Atsugi Army Air Base was alerted for war and things really started buzzing. We set up four emergency tables in the dispensary and sent an ambulance down to the flight line. We were ready for anything, even emergency operations.

"Everyone was issued side arms including Doc and his medics. Doc and I went over to the base dispensary to be sure that they were set up properly then down to the flight line. Crew chiefs were running the ships' engines up, armorers were loading the turrets and wing guns and a convoy of live bombs had just arrived from Yokohama.

"The crews had just finished briefing and were drawing parachutes. I wished I was back on flying status. Ever since March Headquarters had been asking Doc to let me go because they were short of gunners and Doc had left it up to me. If they had offered me the choice last night they'd be looking for a new NCO in charge of the dispensary today.

"It was all called off around nine this morning. I've been sleeping ever since, only got up to shower and eat dinner."