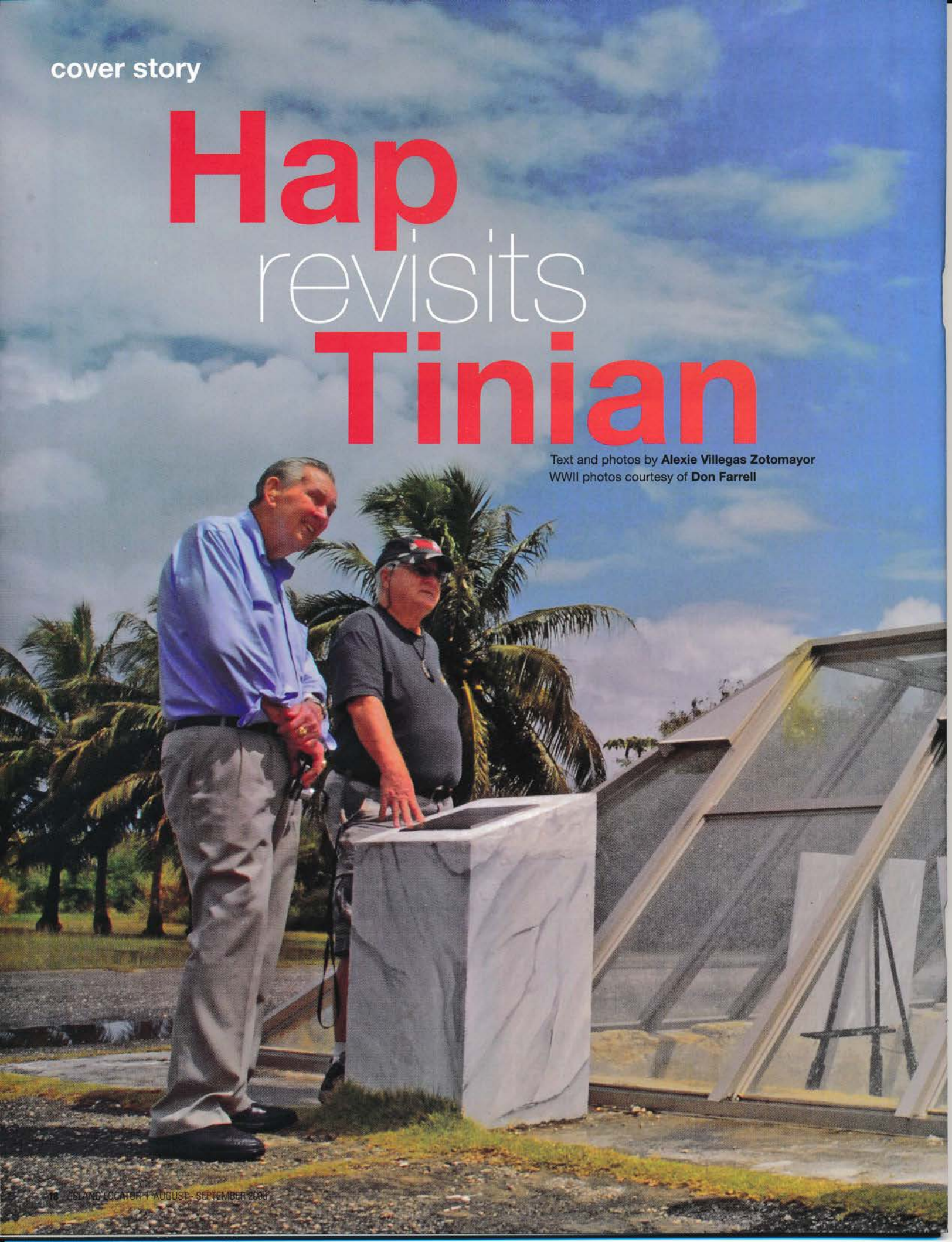
Hap revisits Tinian

Text and photos by **Alexie Villegas Zotomayor**
WWII photos courtesy of **Don Farrell**



A Once-in-a-Lifetime Opportunity

As the editor of Island Locator, I was recently given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to meet and interview the renowned World War II B-29 navigator Hap Halloran, who was based on Isley Field on Saipan, shot down over Japan and spent the rest of the war enduring horrific torment in a Japanese Prisoner of War camp. Hap had visited Saipan many times before our encounter, but this time he wanted a special tour of Tinian—particularly the atomic bomb pits, the bomb assembly area and the 509th Composite Bomb Group camp area.

Having known Saipan resident and co-chair of the 60th Commemoration Committee, Hap asked Jerry Facey to make the arrangements for the Tinian visit. Facey in turn spoke with longtime Tinian resident and local historian Don Farrell and asked him if he was interested in a being Hap's guide on Tinian. "I said yes as fast as I could catch my breath," Farrell told IL. Farrell said he had often run into stories about Saipan B-29 navigator Hap Halloran when he was researching Paul Halloran, the commanding officer of all Seabees on Tinian during the war.

And so it was that Facey, Hap and I flew to Tinian to spend a day with Farrell reliving the events that took place there well over 60 years ago—when Tinian loomed large on the world stage—and learning from Farrell a wealth of extraordinary details about Tinian's historic WWII sites.

Historian Don Farrell points to a map as he tells the beginnings of Broadway Avenue.

The History of Broadway Avenue

As the four of us left the airport on Tinian, we turned north onto a boulevard that runs from the palatial Tinian Dynasty Hotel and Casino in the south to the Hinode Shrine Circle in the north—a road now known as Broadway.

Hap studied our route as Farrell narrated: "This part of Broadway was originally built by the Japanese, using mixed coral and dirt as a roadbed. The Americans created a development plan for Tinian which included extending the road south to the harbor and then hardening it. The Seabees built the road for exactly the same purpose as the Japanese—to get bombs from the south end of the island to the airfield on the north end where Ushi Airfield was located. The U.S. called it North Field." According to Farrell, the senior Seabee commanders began planning the development of Tinian shortly after the first aerial photograph missions from a carrier raid were conducted against the Marianas from 22-24 February 1944.

"The Marianas invasion was originally scheduled for November," Farrell said. "However, Admiral Nimitz pushed the invasion up to June 15. Consequently, the construction planning team in Hawaii had only three-and-a-half months to prepare for the development of Tinian. The job was given to Captain Paul J. Halloran, USN, CEC." Our Hap Halloran, in his characteristic humor blurted out, "I love him already."

Captain Halloran just happened to be a native of Manhattan Island's New York City. According to Farrell, Halloran glanced at the latest Japanese map of Tinian and declared that it closely resembled his own island of Manhattan. Having the authority and liberty to do so, he began naming the roads and locations after those in New York—Broadway, 8th Avenue, 86th Street, even a China Town Strip. When Hap asked what became of his namesake, Farrell said he had been promoted to Commodore due to his efforts on Tinian.

The Tinian Seabees

Farrell was disappointed with not being able to focus more of his attention on the Tinian Seabees due to his commitment to finish his latest book, which is about the role Tinian played in the WWII atomic bomb missions. But he assured us that a book about the Seabees would follow. For their work on Tinian, Hap expressed hopefulness that the Seabees got the recognition they deserved, to which Farrell remarked, "Sadly, they have not received even close to the recognition they deserve."

Farrell described what driving up Broadway in December 1944 might have looked like. "Right now these fields look like something right out of Virginia, a lot of cattle grazing on vast grasslands. During Christmas 1944, however, bulldozers cleared sugarcane from pre-designated sections where thousands of Seabees pitched two-man pup tents. The road we are riding on was being hardened so Seabee trucks could get to the new quarry pits. From the pits, Seabee drivers were hauling coral to what they called Air Strip Number 1, located on top of the old Ushi Air Field and which would one day be the runway for atomic bomb missions to Japan." While the war moved on to Iwo Jima, there were 12,500 Seabees working on the Tinian airfields, night and day, seven days a week.

As we crossed 86th Street, pointing left, Farrell said, "Down there is the monument to the 107th Seabees—one of the 13 Seabee battalions stationed on Tinian with each battallion composed of about 1,100 men. It is on 8th Avenue, which leads south to West Field. There was a traffic cop stationed here 24 hours a day making sure the trucks kept moving. This was one of the busiest intersections on the island."

Next Stop, Invasion Beach

As we climbed out of our SUV at Invasion Beach, located along the northwest coast of the island, Farrell told Hap why the Chamorros called it Unai Chulu. "Still today," Farrell said, "many local families, including ours, come to this beach to camp on long weekends. We stretch a gill net from the edge of the reef across the little lagoon and tie it to a rock. When the tide goes out, the fish get caught. All night long the young men check the net with

Invasion Beach, Tinian

Hap Halloran, Jerry Facey and Don Farrell inspect remains of a Japanese bunker.

flashlights, pulling out the fish and cooking them on the fire. It is a great family experience, chinchulu fishing, as they call it."

Standing on the beach where the invasion took place, Farrell pointed at the ocean, the narrow beach, and the high ground just to the southeast along the Mt. Lasso-Mt. Maga Ridge. "This could have been a nasty fight, but the plan developed by the Navy, Marines and Seabees 'made the day' and saved a lot of lives," said Farrell.

"The Second and Fourth Marine Divisions had just won the battle for Saipan and were pretty beat up," said Farrell. "The Japanese thought the Americans would land on the broad sandy beach in front of Tinian Town and the Americans knew the Japanese expected them to land there, which meant the Marines and Seabees would be landing into the teeth of the enemy again. Consequently, they were able to concoct an invasion plan that was acceptable to Admiral 'Terrible' Turner, commander of all landing forces. To overcome the six- to eight-foot cliffs between beaches White I and White II, the Seabees improvised a portable ramp that could be carried on the back of an amphibious tractor called a 'Doodlebug.' Amtracs that followed used the ramps to gain access to the beach to unload their troops. That's awesome logistics!"

Farrell continued, "Turner ordered the Second Marine Division to load up into their troop carriers and fake a landing at the previously proposed site in front of Tinian Town. Meanwhile, the Fourth Marine Division, with its Seabee detachments, loaded directly into amphibious tractors near Saipan's Sugar Dock. At midnight of July 24, the invasion fleet began its move to southern Tinian. Sentries standing right here on the beach would have watched the fleet, with a conspicuous number of lights on, moving south. General Ogata, the commanding officer of all the Japanese Army forces on Tinian gave the order for his mobile battalion on Mt. Lasso to move south into pre-designated locations for a defense at the beach in front of Tinian Town. Only a small force was left here for a "just in case" scenario. Those poor souls would be the first to die."

Farrell concluded, "Bottom line is, the Fourth Marines faced only what they called "light resistance" and drove on toward Ushi Airfield. The Second Marines then steamed back up here and began to land as soon as the Fourth moved off the beach.

Farrell spoke reverently of the 18th and 121st Seabees, who landed with the Fourth and Second Marine Divisions during the invasion of Tinian. All the while under fire themselves, their job was to make roads and clear debris so the Marines could advance. Seabee bulldozers cleared the beachhead and cut a road toward the airfield.

Hap acknowledged the great job the Seabees did on Tinian, not realizing how extremely important their mission was in order for the invasion to succeed as well as operations that followed.

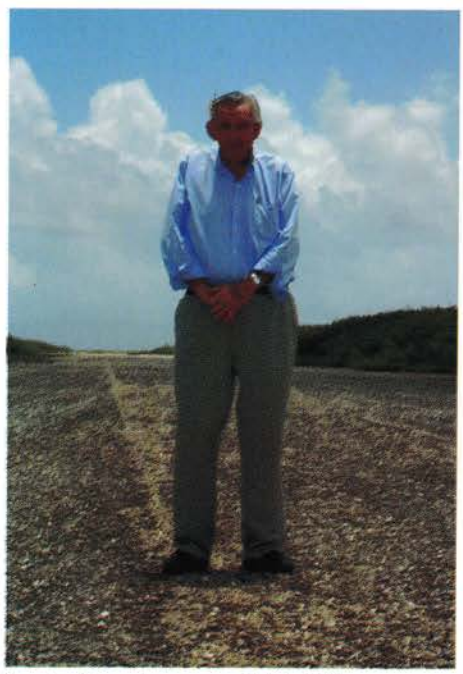
Marine Corps General Holland "Howlin' Mad" Smith called it "the perfect amphibious operation of the Pacific war.'"

The Marines fought off a banzai charge early the next morning and fought their way to Ushi Airfield, while "the Seabees immediately went to work filling the bomb holes and getting the airfield ready for airplanes from Saipan to land, take out our wounded and bring in supplies."

In hindsight, Farrell commented, "there were a lot of screw-ups during the war, many that will never be written about. But when you look at the magnitude of death and destruction that occurred from the time the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor until VJ Day, which includes the victory in Europe—that war was such a huge world event. However, the American team, in battle and at home, did the really big things right, whereas our enemies, Japan and Germany, made dreadful mistakes."

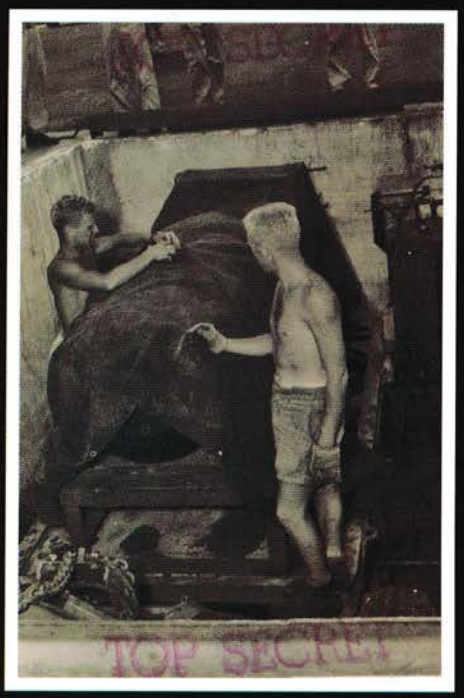
For Farrell, "It was truly a world at war—being able to carry out such vast campaigns in a two-ocean war in such a relatively short period of time. That we were able to maintain pressure and keep driving forward on both fronts is utterly amazing. We got knocked on our heels really bad at Pearl Harbor earlier and the Japanese fully expected the Americans would sue for peace. The Japanese believed the Americans didn't care at all about the Filipinos or the Islanders; that they would gladly give up the Philippines and Guam in return for calling off the war. They really believed that!"

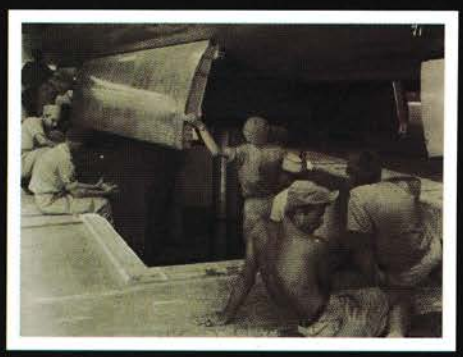
"When they finally tested the Americans' mettle in the Battle of the Coral Sea and then at Midway, all of a sudden they understood they had made a big mistake by underestimating the American resolve."

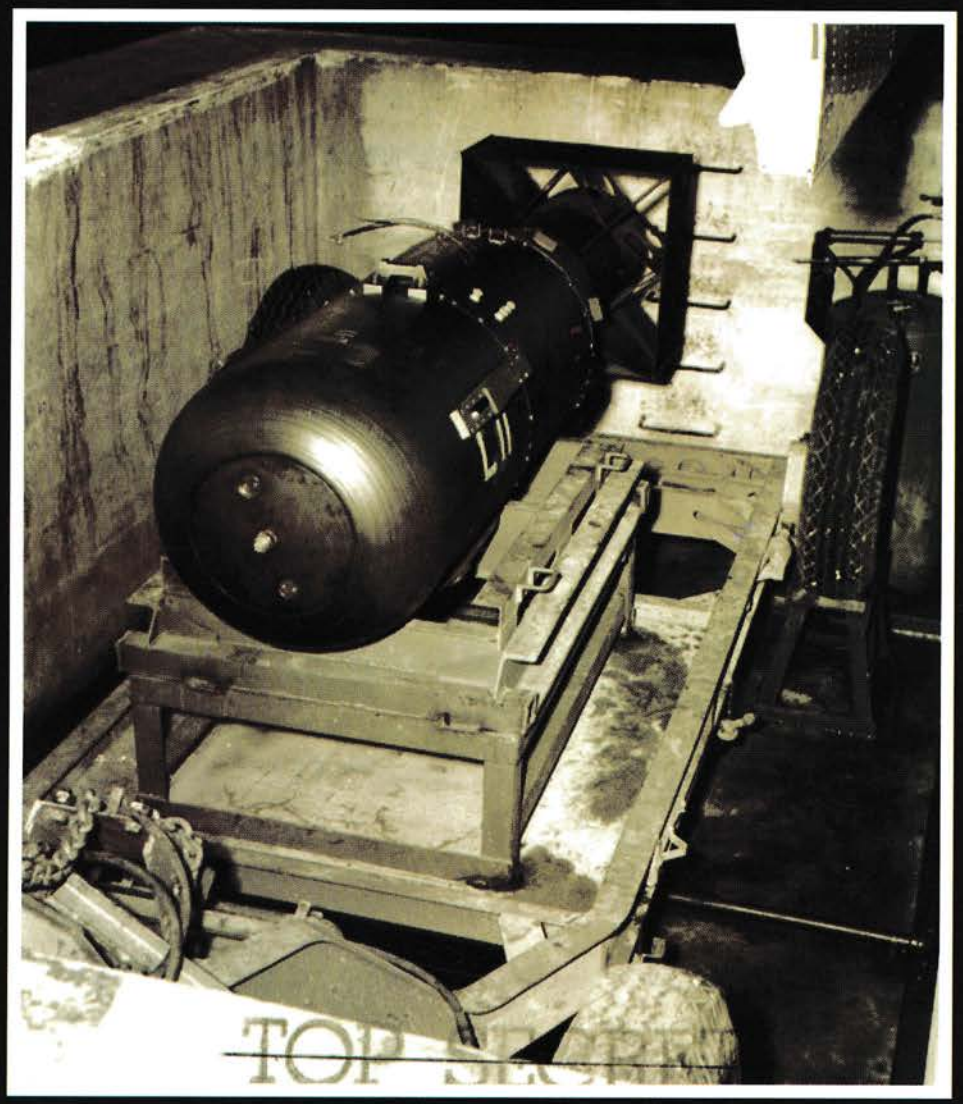


Hap standing on the runway of North Field

Don Farrell and Hap relaxing by the road sign before heading to North Field.







Clockwise: The bomb Little Boy is covered in the pit; the atomic bomb sitting in the pit; Enola Gay's crew that flew the successful Hiroshima atomic bomb mission; preparing for the first historic atomic bomb mission with Hiroshima as primary target; (from left) Lt Col Payette, Maj Ferebee, Col Tibbets, and Maj Van Kirk; the bomb is being loaded to the Colonel Tibbets's Enola Gay.

The Enola Gay crew preparing for the first atomic mission

Both Hap and Farrell concluded that the Japanese were disheartened and just could not bring themselves mentally to accept defeat. Hap, a successful business consultant, compared Japanese decisions to those of an American businessmen. "The Japanese just couldn't write off a bad investment while an American would easily get out of it and move on."

Before leaving White Beach, Farrell guided Hap into a nearby coastal bunker where they found prewar photos of a Japanese family and incense on the floor, recently brought there by a relative who was probably praying for a departed son or grandson from the war.

From the invasion beaches, we proceeded to the bomb pits, where more discussions about World War II's details unfolded and where Farrell shared his firm grasp of the history of the atomic bombs.

North Field, Tinian

Turning onto Lennox Avenue, we drove around to the official bomb pit entrance. Farrell drove past one bomb pit and stopped at the other nearby. It was chilling to look at the bomb loading pictures in Farrell's book and know we were standing right where that happened 63 years ago.

Serious work began on developing an atomic bomb after President Roosevelt gave it his official "OK, FDR" in June, 1942, Farrell explained. It took two and a half years to refine uranium and produce plutonium, design a simple bomb, and modify an airplane to carry the 9,500 pound beast. The 509th Composite Bomb Group was created as the "delivery mechanism" in September 1944, under the command of Colonel Paul W. Tibbets, Jr., US Army Air Force; however, Admiral Nimitz got wind of the plan in December 1944, which was to send something called a "Composite Group" to the Marianas, without his permission. He was not happy.

At a hurriedly called meeting in D.C., and later in Los Alamos, New Mexico, plans were made to decide on just where in the Marianas America's first atomic strike base should be established. Navy Commander Frederick L. Ashworth was chosen to be the one to break the news to Nimitz. He arrived on Guam in early February with a letter from Nimitz' boss, Admiral of the United States Navy Ernest J. King, telling Nimitz to cooperate. Ashworth went on to explain to Nimitz that they created this new bomb with an explosive force of 20,000 tons TNT." To provide a better picture how destructive the atomic bomb was, Farrell explained, "A single B-29 could carry a maximum load of 10 tons. It would take 2,000 B-29s all dropping their bombs simultaneously to equal this one bomb. This got Nimitz's attention."

General Curtis LeMay, commanding officer of all B-29s in the Pacific, then gave Ashworth a letter of introduction to the Tinian Island Commander, Brig. Gen. Frederick Von Harten Kimble, who took him directly to North Field. Meanwhile, the 313th Wing had already set up and was busy carrying bombs to Tokyo. As he surveyed the area, Ashworth noticed the coastline just west of North Field was not being used, was large enough to house the ordnance and bomb assembly buildings, and could easily be fenced in. Without telling Kimble why, the Navy commander said he would take it. Ashworth flew back to Guam and pointed to an area he had circled on a map of Tinian. Nimitz nodded his approval. The commander then flew back to Washington where he reported his findings to General Leslie Groves, Commanding Officer of the Manhattan Project. The decision for Tinian was made.

Groves, according to Farrell, then turned the project over to one of his engineers—Lt. Col. Elmer E. Kirkpatrick, Jr., a West Point graduate and a civil engineer, whose two brothers were Naval Academy graduates. He would slide into Tinian the following month, disguised as an Air Force engineer with some sketchy plans under his arm. The plan for the 509th Composite Group was underway.

Atomic Bomb Pits

Reaching the first pit, Hap asked Farrell which one is Pit No. 1 and Pit No. 2, an enumeration that Farrell debunked. "We talked it over with several other historians and we all pretty much believe that both bombs were loaded in one pit," Farrell said.

"There was no bomb pit No. 1 or 2. It was created in the minds of the people when they put up

the original monuments."

"From studying the pictures of the pits after they were excavated for the 60th (commemoration), it looks pretty clear that they were both loaded in this pit because there are slight differences in the insides of the pits," Farrell said.

Remembering his conversations with General Paul Tibbets in 2004 on Tinian, Hap said, "One time, I was with Tibbets, after the day's program, and Tibbets told him, 'I don't know why they built the second pit because we never needed it.'" Farrell retorted, "Because everything in the Manhattan Project had redundancies—sometimes three or four times. Everything had a backup."

Hap asked Farrell, "Do you feel that the bombs we dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima were all of the bombs we had completed and ready to drop?"

Farrell replied, "We were ready to go with one within another week or so. And after that, we could deliver one a week. We were ready to drop them as long as it took."

As far as backups were concerned, Farrell said before the Enola Gay and Bockscar missions, an intermediate base was built on Iwo Jima with two hardstands and one atomic bomb pit. For both missions, Kirkpatrick was the officer in charge on Iwo Jima, standing by in case the Enola Gay or Bockscar had mechanical problems en route. The bomb would be transferred to a standby plane, and the mission would continue.

The Atomic Bomb

The uranium bomb was very simple, said Farrell. "It worked just like a gun. They put a uranium target at one end of the gun barrel, put a uranium bullet at the other end, and then loaded gunpowder behind the bullet. When the gunpowder was fired, the uranium bullet smashed into the uranium target, creating critical mass, and the uranium explodes."

But the Nagasaki bomb, nicknamed Fat Man, was more complex. For the plutonium bomb to work, Farrell said, "They couldn't use the gun mechanism. Instead, the scientists took one eleven-pound piece about the size of a baseball and surrounded it with

64 perfectly shaped high explosive charges that would crush the plutonium to a ball about the size of a golf ball thus reaching critical mass. The big problem was figuring out a wiring system that would detonate all 64 within a millisecond. Nobel Prize winner George Kistiakowski accomplished this tasks at Los Alamos."

The Mission

They waited for perfect weather over Japan. The three planes in Tibbetts's strike mission—Enola Gay, a plane carrying instruments to measure the strength of the bomb and a photographic plane—rendezvoused at Iwo Jima, as they had practiced so many times. Then they flew straight to Hiroshima, dropped the bomb, and came straight home, all on a clear and sunny day. Everything was absolutely perfect. There was no reason why it should not have been perfect because they waited for the perfect opportunity."

Hap spoke about the ethical implications of dropping the bomb but had they waited, more POWs like Hap would have died in prison camps, while hundreds of thousands of innocent people in the Philippines, China, Burma, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, would have died had the bombs not been used not to mention the estimated million or more Japanese and American deaths in Japan had an invasion taken place.

They all agreed that the Tibbets mission was perfect. "It came as a complete surprise to the Japanese."

The Critical Nagasaki Mission

For the Nagasaki mission, Tibbets picked Charles Sweeney to fly the mission. Farrell said General LeMay was shocked when he found out that Tibbets was not flying the second mission as well. "He could have flown the mission. The Enola Gay operated perfectly. Same plane, same people, same job."

When Tibbetts chose Sweeney, Sweeney had the prerogative to pick his own plane. Unfortunately, he couldn't take his regular plane, The Great Artiste, the same one he flew on the Hiroshima mission as the instrument plane, because they didn't have time to move the instruments to another plane. So he chose Bockscar instead.

Farrell continued, "So Sweeney had to switch to another plane and he took his crew with him but it was a strange plane. All B-29s are B-29s and all Chevys are Chevys. But still, every one of them has its little quirks. Right off the bat, one of these quirks popped up. They couldn't get the fuel transfer pump on the auxilliary fuel tanks to work. The mission was delayed as they discussed the problem. The decision was made to go with Bockscar anyway. The Nagasaki mission was underway."

Because of bad weather, a bad omen, Sweeney chose a new rendezvous point at Yakushima, a small island at the southern end of Kyushu that none of them had ever flown over. The photographic plane never made the rendezvous.

When Bockscar and the instrument plane, The Great Artiste, finally got to their primary target, Kokura, it was covered with haze and industrial smoke, possibly caused by General LeMay who had firebombed Yawata, just 60 miles up wind, the day before. The plane made three passes at Kokura without seeing the target as required. It was as if the bomb didn't want to be dropped.

Fortunately, due to excellent radar coordination, Sweeney made one direct path over the secondary target Nagasaki, the bombardier saw an identifiable landmark, and took the shot.

After Fat Man was released and they began their trip home, they discovered the auxiliary fuel tank was broken and they would not be able to use the 600 gallons of gas stored in it to complete the journey. Since Sweeney was so low on fuel, he had to head for the newly captured base at Okinawa, Yontan; however, his troubles still weren't over. When he approached the island his gas gauges read empty. He had no choice: It would be an emergency landing. As Bockscar dove for the runway, it lost one engine from fuel starvation. The plane hit the runway hard, bouncing about 25 feet in the air, then making an emergency turn at the very end of the runway. Then all other engines began coughing to death. When the plane was finally parked and they measured the tanks, seven gallons of useable fuel was all that was left.

On the ground, in order to send a message to Tinian, Sweeney met with the Island Commander who turned out to be General Jimmy Doolittle, leader of the first bombing attack on Tokyo from the deck of the carrier Hornet in 1942. With the message sent, Sweeney, along with the crews of the other two strike mission aircraft that also arrived low on fuel, took on half-a-tank for the ride home and left.

The Japanese leadership received the message about the Nagasaki bombing while they were discussing surrender. Later on the night the Nagasaki bomb was dropped, Emperor Hirohito made his final decision to end the war. His tentative acceptance of "unconditional surrender," was wired from Tokyo at about 6:00 a.m. on the morning of the 10th.

Hap standing beside a war memorial to the B-29 bombers

Closure

As they drove back to the south end of the island, Hap acknowledged that this was a trip he will never forget. He would return home with fond memories of Tinian and the voluminous information that Farrell shared about the Manhattan Project and Tinian's hugging the limelight during the end of World War II and the fact that Tinian played a very significant role in hastening the war's end.

Back at the historic Fleming's Hotel's restaurant, Hap remembered once again the many others who fought against the Japanese, those Seabees who failed to get the recognition they deserve and whose efforts would not be for naught since Farrell is working on a book that would finally give them the credit they deserve.

Tinian became the largest operational airbase in the world during World War II with four 8,500-foot runways at North Field and two at West Field and a new harbor to support both. And the Seabees made it happen.

Our short flight back to Saipan and back into the present age took us over most of the entire tiny island of Tinian and above the now desolate World War II landing strips at North Field. Glancing out the window at the scene below, Hap muttered mostly to himself, but loud enough for me to overhear, "Imagine, those now deserted runways were once the busiest in the entire world and it's at that very spot where the atomic age began. Remarkable!"