NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

Wings & Things Guest Lecture Series

My True Course

Dutch Van Kirk, the navigator from the B-29 Enola Gay, *the aircraft that dropped the world's first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan, gives a first-hand perspective of one of World War II's most famous missions.*

FEMALE SPEAKER: Good afternoon. Welcome to the National Museum of the United States Air Force. Thank you for joining us today for the presentation by Dutch Van Kirk, the navigator of Enola Gay. Now I'd like to introduce the moderator for today's presentation, Mr. Ed Humphreys.

ED HUMPHREYS: Here we go.

MALE SPEAKER: Go show them.

HUMPHREYS: Good afternoon. 2:45 a.m. Sixth of August 1945, the B-29 Superfortress Enola Gay lifted up from Tinian Island, bound for Hiroshima, Japan. Theodore "Dutch" Van Kirk guided the historic mission precisely with bombardier Tom Ferebee, releasing the weapon at 8:15 a.m., Hiroshima time, only 12 seconds later than planned. This amazing precision was planned and led by primarily by the 509th Group CO, pilot Paul Tibbets, bombardier Maj. Tom Ferebee and navigator Theodore "Dutch" Van Kirk.

Dutch joined the Army Air Corps Aviation Cadet Program in October 1941. On April 1st, 1942, he received both his commission and navigator wings and transferred to the 97th Bomb Group, the first operational B-17 Fortress unit in England. The crew of the "Red Gremlin" also included Paul Tibbets and Tom Ferebee.

From August to October 1942, the crew flew 11 B-17 missions out of England, including the first daylight bombing raid on occupied Europe. In October 1942, they flew Gen. Mark Clark to Gibraltar, for his secret North African rendezvous with French, prior to Operation Torch. In November, they ferried Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower and his staff to Gibraltar, to command the North African invasion forces. Dutch returned to the States in June 1943, after flying a total of 58 missions in the "Red Gremlin" B-17.

He served as an instructor navigator until re-uniting with Tibbets and Ferebee for the 509th Composite Group, out of Wendover Field, Utah, in late 1944. The group flew the B-29 Superfortress with Tibbets as commander and Van Kirk as the group navigator. From November '44 to June of '45 over 3,000 men and 15 B 29s train continuously for the first atomic bomb drop. That 13-hour mission to Hiroshima began at 0245 Tinian time. By the time they rendezvoused with their accompanying B-29s at 0607 over Iwo Jima, the group was three hours

from target area. As they approached the target, Dutch worked closely with the bombardier Tom Ferebee to confirm the winds and aim point. The bomb fell away from the aircraft at 01517 Tinian time and the end result was the end of World War II.

In August 1946, he completed his service in the Army Air Corps as major. His decorations include the Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross and 15 Air Medals.

Now ladies and gentleman, it is my honor and privilege to introduce Maj. "Dutch" Van Kirk.

[Applause]

MAJ. DUTCH VAN KIRK: And here we go, a happy day. Thank you. I will do that, thank you. Is Tony down there? Yep. Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Thank you so much. In fact, thank you for coming out and hearing me today. Either one of two things is happening, either your air conditioning isn't working, or you're, what you're really an atomic enthusiast and want to hear about it, one of the two, probably your air conditioning isn't working, but that's all right.

Ed described a few things that I did during my, well, during the war, and I want to mention now, even though they had no connection with the atomic bomb, I don't think they had any at all. And little things, that happened on various missions. We were flying one day, this is about our sixth mission over Europe. We had a colonel flying with us, Longfellow. I remember that name well. Longfellow had a B-25, he would take off after us, beat us to our destination, and he would either was either chewing on us before we left and be there when we arrived too, and that sort of thing. We hated the man, and that sort of thing, but that's all right. And, but Longfellow was flying with us one day, and we got attacked from head on, obviously, and the pilot shot us up, shot up the co-pilot and there were that few things of that type. And Tibbets set and wasted no time, he just bang, knocked them out. Now Tibbets at the time was a major and that sort of thing, knocking out a full colonel and everything of that type. That wasn't a very wise idea. But when they got back, Longfellow said, "That was exactly the right thing to do." That was one of our missions. That's when we got a new airplane by the way. So, we went through a quite a few, but we finally got an airplane we called the "Red Gremlin." It had the … the serial number ended in 4444. That was a lucky airplane. We flew the rest of our missions in 4444 without being shot down once, and that was exceptional.

I'll also tell you a little bit about taking Eisenhower and his staff from England, down to North Africa, down to Gibraltar, I should say, to command the North African invasion. These are history, there's not very many people who remember these things, you know, and that sort of thing. But in any event, we arrived down there, but before that, two days before, we had taken Mark Clark down to England, from England, down to Gibraltar, and we were all armed to the teeth, I had a Carbine, a sub… I didn't know how to shoot them. Carbine, a submachine gun, a 45 automatic and fully any other weapon anyone could hang on me too and everything of that type. We thought we would have to fly into North Africa and pick him up, if things went wrong. Very fortunately that did not happen, he braved the surf, to get on a submarine out there and then come back.

Now two days later, we got, we were flying to take General Eisenhower, down to North Africa. He's going to command the North African invasion. We didn't know that at the time. We arrive in a placed called Hurn, England, H-U-R-N, on the southern coast of England, and then the bodies are delivered to us. We had six of our B-17s to go down there, with six of our best pilots, to go down there, and this sort of thing. And I will never forget, the morning that they came out there to take off. You could not even see the wingtips of your airplane; it was that thick and everything of that type. And now we get on a bit of semantics and that sort of thing between Tibbets and Eisenhower, and Tibbets is saying, "Well, do you want to go, General?" The general won't make the decision and everything of that type and Eisenhower said everything of that type. Finally, Eisenhower made a decision, he said, "Son," he says, "I have a war to fight down there and I got to get there," and he says, "And I only have one way, and I'm not walking." So he says, "You'd better take off fast," but that Tibbets says, "Okay, fellas, load up." Now in Hurn, England, I always remember, out here sitting to just to the left of the runway and sticking up, I don't know how many feet, 100 feet, some of this type, a big old church steeple. I could just see myself wrapped around that church steeple; it wasn't a pretty sight, believe me. But we line up on an astrocompass setting. Tibbetts takes off and he gets off the ground, so everything was fine. Now you're all wondering what happened to all six of those airplanes, six B-17s going down from England down to Gibraltar. One of them didn't make it. He went into the Bay of Biscayne. He was on fire. We have no idea what caused that airplane to catch on fire. That was one airplane. A second airplane, flown by a fellow gentlemen named, Summers, was attacked by German aircraft out over the Bay of Biscayne area, shot up and this sort of thing. They had to turn around and go back to base. He was fortunate. He had on a ready-made co-pilot named Doolittle, how about that? How lucky can you be if you're going to get shot up, that you have a co-pilot by the name of Doolittle and that sort of thing?

Well, okay then, we're down at Gibraltar, and you had to fly south of Gibraltar and then come north. We're trying to fool the Germans into thinking we're coming from the States. We didn't fool the Germans at all or anything of that type, but we came up north and everything, and then that night we had a big briefing of the invasion plans. And someone, I don't know who, but he warned me, he says, "At such and such a time tonight, you be up at a certain point in the rock," and he says, "You will see one of the most stirring sights you will never see in your life." And he was absolutely right. You were up in the, up there in the rock, and the first thing you hear, you don't see our Navy, but you hear them talking to the British Navy and their code, I don't know what it is, I can't understand it or anything of that type. But anyhow, you could hear them talking to the British Navy, then suddenly all their lights go on. They were going through the Straits of Gibraltar that night, regardless of who argued with them or who talked to them. Now this was a small fleet. It was a fleet that was going to land in Oran and Algiers, and Patton had landed down in Casablanca and that sort of thing. But it was a very small fleet compared to what we had on D-Day, what we would have had to invade Japan or anything of that type. But talk about being, I was a 21-year-old at that time, and talk about being impressed, I even thought the Navy knew what they were doing, that's all I could say.

The next morning, next morning was a little more interesting because we got awakened early and we were briefed. They said, "You're going to be the escort for Spitfires going into Algiers. He says, "Oh, that's an interesting thing. That's just about the range for a Spitfire." "You're right,

yes, absolutely." So anyhow, we take off, we all make formation and that sort of thing, we are above the clouds and we're going into Algiers, and I could hear all the RAF in the Spitfires cursing me. "Where's this damn Yank taking us" and so on and so forth. Finally, I called Tibbets and I said, "Tell those guys to go 14 miles straight ahead, drop below the clouds. There's an airfield there; they should land on it, and I hope it's captured." Tibbets says, "If you want to tell them that, you call and tell them. I am not going to do that." So Tibbets didn't call or anything else.

Well, these were our adventures leading out to things that happened, that welded us together in North Africa. Paul Tibbets was our cook. You will never imagine him cooking a fried chicken in the waste of a B-17, and today if you did it, you'd be court martialed. They'd say you were crazy and everything of that type, and at those days we didn't really care and everything. So we were there and everything else and eventually, then we all break up and we come back to the States and then later on Paul Tibbets calls me to join the atomic mission.

Now you're expecting great things. Hell, I don't, we just trained to drop atomic weapons and everything of that type. We formed up with our unit out of Wendover, Utah. We had 15 airplanes to drop atomic weapons, and all were well trained and sign sealed to drop the atomic weapons. And Paul was right away, if you've seen a, one of the video tapes of Paul and you wanted, in it he's asked "Were you ask who is going to drop that first atomic bomb?" His answer was "Yeah damn it, it was me, I was going to, I was a Commanding Officer, I was going to drop the first atomic bomb, and that was the way he ran the whole outfit."

I did not find out I was going to drop an atomic bomb until February of that year, and then I found out by accident. How did you find out? You saw a bunch of people running around, who were atomic physicists, and if atomic, these people were running around, they were all atomic physicists, you were going to drop something that was going to wipe out a city and everything. You put two and two together and you soon figured out that you were going to drop an atomic weapon. Now if you did, you kept your mouth shut about it, because if Tibbets found you talking about it, he'd transfer you up to the Aleutian Islands where you could talk to the Chinese, oh the Eskimos all you wanted to. They couldn't understand you, you couldn't understand them, so you're even.

While we were at the, in, on Tinian, and we trained, we went over there, I got there on June 25th, my son's birthday, by the way, and we continued to train to drop atomic weapons. Well, how did we do it? We had bombs that we called "dummy bombs," and these dummies were just exactly that. They were the same size, weight and shape as the atomic bomb, except they were loaded with non-explosives. You took one of them, you went up to Japan, you stooged around, you dropped it under conditions that were exactly the same as what you expected to find when you dropped the atomic bomb. And that was our training. All of our crews flew at least six of those missions and everything else, as for the training.

And now I'll speed this along then and everything else. We come along toward the end of August and finally we receive word that Harry Truman has okayed dropping the atomic bomb. We had tested the one in New Mexico already. The one tested in New Mexico was a plutonium bomb; we dropped a U-235 bomb. One of the things you do not forget is we dropped two

different atomic bombs over Japan. The U-235 bomb was much more, harder, to maintain a chain reaction and had to be ultra-ultra pure, before it would do so. The uranium bomb was much easier to maintain a chain reaction, and once you got it started, you couldn't stop it. The bomb dropped on Hirosh … on Nagasaki was a uranium bomb; that was the second one dropped. All subsequent bombs were uranium bombs. I think to this day that's true; they're still uranium bombs. The Japanese thought they were working with U-235. To this day, I believe that the Japanese thought we only had one bomb. We only had one U-235 bomb; that's the reason they did not react when we dropped the bomb at Hiroshima. It wasn't until the second one was dropped on Nagasaki that they figured out we can make more than one, and they reacted to that then. I am getting ahead of my story.

Truman approved the use of the bomb as soon as the weather was okay. That day was going to be June the 6th, 1945, and everyone now expects all Hollywood to break loose. The star is going to arrive on the show and everything of that type, and Tom Cruise is going to drop the atomic bomb and everything of that type. It was not that way at all. Back in those days, you did not have automatic navigation and everything, you had, Tibbets sure looked at me and says, "What time do you want to drop that bomb, Dutch," and I says, "Well, you better damn well drop it in the morning; we don't have lights in this field," and that sort of thing. That was, that was our deciding factor. He said, "Okay, you work it backwards until what time, time we should takeoff." The time we took off was 2:45 a.m. Everything in the Air Force started at 2:45, for Heaven's sake; they'd do anything to get you out of bed. Now, we had a briefing in the day, the day before, and there was, you, you know, you knew it was going to be a big one, there are Tommy guns, guys out there with Tommy guns and everything and guarding you against, I don't know what they thought we were going to do, we couldn't get off the island anyhow and that sort of thing. But we have guys out there with Tommy guns, guarding us at the debriefing and everything of that type. The debriefing went according to normal. You know, you get a briefing, so what and everything, you're going to take off, you're going to drop a bomb. There are a lot of things that could have gone wrong with our U-235 bomb.

General Farrell, the general, I am sorry Captain Farrell, Navy Captain Farrell. That's wrong. Navy Captain Parsons decided that he could arm the bomb in flight. Why? Because we lost more airplanes off at the end of the runway over on Tinian than we did over Japan. One engine, one pull full power, they wind up going down the runway and they came to the end of it and they'd go off the end of runway into the Pacific Ocean. We lost more airplanes at the end of the runway than we did over Japan. So he decided that he was going to ignore captain, yeah, Vicky help me … Parsons, no, no the general in charge …

MALE SPEAKER: General Farrell.

VAN KIRK: Farrell, yeah, thank you sir, thank you. General, he was, he thought he was going to ignore General Farrell and he would arm the bomb in flight, which is what he did. I'll never forget him and – he and his assistant went back in the bomb bay – now the fact that we had an atomic bomb on board did not bother me. The fact that they were back there playing around with black powder did. He came out of that bomb bay; his hands were black. The machine threads were finely threaded and that type and he had it all over his hands and everything of that, that type, but he armed the bomb in flight.

We flew, we took off at 2:45 as I said. Now one other point I want to make, the press was not on the island. They were nowhere to be seen, but then everybody was taking pictures and recording and everything of that time. What were they doing? They were recording for the Manhattan Project. The good general didn't want to be briefed by Congress if he failed, that's all I have, that was my theory anyhow. So anyhow, that was the reason for all of that. If the plane was lit up by tech lights, you would have thought, I don't know what you would have thought, something special was coming, fellas, I don't know what, but you should be prepared for it and so on and so forth. So anyhow, he armed the bomb in flight. and then we took off and he did that while we flew off to Iwo Jima at low altitude, I know, because I always got sick at low altitude and everything of that type. But we flew up there again at low altitude and then we started our climb up, up to bombing altitude. Our bombing altitude was 31,000 feet, as high as we could get.

Every once in a while, you know, you find people that, stretch the imagination a little bit, and this one guy, I just read his obituary, from Birmingham Alabama. He said he was flying high cover for us. How he was doing it, it was beyond me, we were as high as high we could get and would have gone higher if we could have got there, but he was flying high cover for us and everything of that type.

So we go up there, and we climb up to altitude, before we pass that 10,000 foot mark, Norris Jefferson goes back on the bomb bay, makes the final adjustment on the bomb, he was taking out the green plugs and putting in the red plugs. Now the bomb is also electrically on, anything can happen. We went in and crossed over Shikoku, crossed over a little, the streets of Japan, to the east of Tokyo, made a left-hand turn and lined over, lined up on Hiroshima and on, and I pointed out to Ferebee, I says, "Do you see the target?" Tom says, "I can't see a damn thing." I says, "Do you see the target, that's that damn bridge down there." Then he says, "Oh, that bridge. Now I see the target." That was Tom Ferebee, you know.

So we went in, dropped the bomb, and that was all that was to it. Tibbets immediately snapped off the co-pilot, the automatic pilot, and put the plane in a 60-degree bank to make a 180-degree turn. 60-degree bank is about like that now. You're turning pretty damn fast, but Tibbets always told the pilots, if you could not get it around in less than a minute, I don't want you in this outfit, so that's the way it was. It was a 60-degree bank, lose 2,000 feet in the turn, run away from the bomb and put as much distance between you and the bomb as you possibly can. Now I'm sure, in the present day, they can have better ways of dropping atomic bombs, but we were just running. People want to know, does that maneuver have a name? I say hell yes, it's called "getting away from the bomb." Absolutely, no question about it, and we come around and after we level, just about the time we level out, we get the biggest shockwave I had ever seen in my life. It rattled the plane and everything else. The plane, and after a while Tibbets called and says, "Is the plane still flying?" Yes, it was, by God, and everything else. We got away with it.

So we turned around to take a look at what had happened, made a, continued our turn around. The next thing we saw was that the large white cloud, you have seen pictures of, up well above our altitude already, up above 50,000 feet already. And that cloud was so high that we could see it from 267 miles away and 15,000 feet, that's how high and everything else, that energy has sent that cloud. Well, you looked down to the base of that cloud and the entire city of Hiroshima just

looked as though it was covered with thick black smoke and dust. It reminded you of a pot of boiling oil, that's about the nearest description I can describe. We could not see anything, could not make any visual observation. So I flew little bit in the Southeast quarter and we turned and went home.

A few comments … number one, we had no opposition whatsoever, in spite of Jake Beser says in his book. We had no opposition. The Japanese, unfortunately, at that time of the war, had no opposition to high flying enemy airplanes. You could go up there and fly anyplace you wanted to.

So we, we just decided, the hell, we may as well go home, which is what we did, and we get back there and the only thing I can say is, that there are more generals there and admirals than I had never seen in one place in my life. If the Japanese had known about it and hit us with a bomb, at that point, at that time, we would have lost the entire Air Force. Spaatz was there, LeMay was there, they were all there and everything like that.

One thing I should tell you about, at our briefing, they briefed us we were going to go and drop an atomic bomb. Then they told us to go back and get some sleep. Now how they expected us to do that is absolutely beyond me. Tibbets didn't sleep, Ferebee didn't sleep, I didn't sleep, and Ferebee won the money in the poker game, that's all I can say.

Okay, a little bit later on, when we were awake, we had a debriefing and so on and so forth. But an interesting thing happened. Morris Jeppson had some Navy friends over there and they met him at the end of the, of his stint, when he got back and then they invited him to go to their mess hall. They went to the mess hall, had a nice dinner. At the end of the dinner, they were sitting around talking about what they are all doing in the war, to win the war. It comes to Morris Jeppson's turn, he says, "We won the war today." They thought he was a damn liar until the next day when they read the paper and saw that we had dropped an atomic bomb. They no longer thought we were liars, and everything of that type.

The next mission, the mission to Hiroshima. As I said we dropped a uranium bomb. This uranium bomb, it had a compression factor and everything of that type, worked every bit as good as the U-235 bomb did, and we dropped that on Hiroshima. The mission that day was to drop the bomb on Kokura, which was supposed to be the first target hit. Kokura, they could not see the bomb, they made a pass, Beehan says, "No drop." Second pass, no drop, third pass, no drop, fourth pass, no … come on, what is it you want to hear and that sort of thing. So they finally decided to go onto Hiroshima. At Hiroshima, they lined up on a radar run, which they were not supposed to do by the way. We were told that we had to drop the bomb visually, if we could not drop the bomb visually, we were supposed to take it out and drop it in the ocean. Do not bring it back to the base with you. And I guess that made sense by God and everything of that type. But they said, they lined up on a radar run, at the last minute Beehan saw the ground, he says, "I dropped the bomb visually." He knows he didn't, we know we didn't, but what the hell, the war is over, why worry about it and everything else. So that was the second bomb.

Later on, I was commanded to go to the Bikini test, where they lined them all up and they put a battleship, painted red out here, in the middle of it and everything else. Now, how in the hell a

bombardier could miss that target is beyond me, but he did. He missed it; he was 1500 feet to the left and short. LeMay came into the party they were having that night and looked around and says, "Well, here come three people and will tell me where that bomb dropped." We were trying to get out of there before we could encounter LeMay because you didn't want to give him bad news, by the way, and that sort of thing. So we finally told him where the bomb dropped, and we were assigned to get out of there, yet that night and fly the pictures back to Washington. That's all they needed and that sort of thing.

Well, that's all I had to send … that was my atomic career, I got out, I'm back to college, I went to work for DuPont. I think it was a successful career, wasn't it, Vicky? And everything else. I was a vice president there when I retired and that sort of thing. And so all in all it was a very good life and now I am going to shut my mouth, and Ed, you have, you are going to take some pict… you are going to get some questions, is that right?

HUMPHREYS: Right.

VAN KIRK: That's my mouthpiece here.

HUMPHREYS: Check-check-check. These are some questions you folks sent in. Dutch, so I'm just going to read them off and … let's … what …

VAN KIRK: I hope I understand.

HUMPHREYS: Let's hear what they want to know. What was the name of the bomb that Enola Gay dropped?

VAN KIRK: "Little Boy."

HUMPHREYS: Easy one.

VAN KIRK: That was easy!

HUMPHREYS: Who named it?

VAN KIRK: Damned if I know.

HUMPHREYS: I just made that one up. [Laughter]

VAN KIRK: Maybe the scientists did, I have no idea.

HUMPHREYS: Okay. Among the crew, were there bets if the device would work or not?

VAN KIRK: Yes. Oh and I lost a lot of money that day, by the way. [Laughter] Two days before we dropped the bomb, we sent Chuck Sweeney up to test the radar proximity fuse. This bomb dropped to 18,000 feet, where it exploded according to a radar proximity fuse. Why did we do that? Because we wanted to have the blast effective, come down like this and spread out. If we, it

had hit the ground, all we would have done, was dig a big hole in the ground. We wanted to get that blast effect coming out, so we exploded it at 1800 feet. Now, Sweeney went up and tested the radar proximity fuse two days before we dropped the bomb. He dropped the bomb with the radar proximity fuse, all the telescopes trained on the new bomb, bomb dropped into the ocean, unexploded. It gave you a lot of confidence. Believe me, it did and that sort of thing.

HUMPHREYS: And when you said ...

VAN KIRK: So anyway, I was taking all the bets I could get that this bomb was going to be a dud. Did I lose my share that's all I can say?

HUMPHREYS: That answers this second question, we wanted to know which way you went. Was it was a difficult mission to fly?

VAN KIRK: It was a very easy mission to fly. We had no enemy opposition. I did not get shot at. That was a big break and everything else. So nobody was shooting at you or any of that. They had no flak that could reach us, no fighters that could reach us or anything else. The Japanese, let me just put it this way, the Japanese were a licked people before we ever dropped the atomic bombs. We practically burned Japan down before we ever dropped the atomic bombs. The atomic bombs did not win the war, it just gave Japan the excuse to get out of the war and save face. It was not the reason; it was the excuse.

HUMPHREYS: All right, Dutch, were you ever a Cub Scout or a Boy Scout growing up?

VAN KIRK: Yes I was, unfortunately, never mind. [Laughter]

HUMPHREYS: This one just says thanks.

VAN KIRK: That's good.

HUMPHREYS: This one was already answered. Flight path and fuel stops?

VAN KIRK: What now?

HUMPHREYS: We want to know about your flight path and fuel stops from Wendover to the Marianas.

VAN KIRK: Oh my God. We were stopping every, one stop at Wendover, we went to Travis, to Hawaii to Johnson to Kwajalein to Tinian. How many stops is that?

HUMPHREYS: Did you ever get lost?

VAN KIRK: Hell no. Not that I'd admit anyhow. It either … if you were a navigator, it either paid to be lucky or to be good. I was lucky.

HUMPHREYS: Now this one you kind of answered. He wants to know about entering the dive with a turn after the release?

VAN KIRK: I can't understand you.

HUMPHREYS: He was asking about … we hear about the airplane entering a dive and a turn after a release.

VAN KIRK: It was not a dive; we just lost 2,000 feet.

HUMPHREYS: Okay.

VAN KIRK: Just to build up speed. It was done to build up speed more than anything else.

HUMPHREYS: What two items of personal importance did you have on your mission?

VAN KIRK: None. You could not, you were not allowed to take anything of personal importance on a mission.

HUMPHREYS: Have you been back to Japan?

VAN KIRK: Oh, I forgot to tell you about that. [Laughter]

HUMPHREYS: And they also want to know, did the Japanese hate you?

VAN KIRK: Some of them did, I'm sure, and everything else, but most of them did not. After the war, the people that made the bomb decided that we should go up to Japan to see what effects it had in Japan. So we flew up to Tokyo to pick up some of the Japanese people who had worked on the Japanese atomic project. Remember, everybody in those days had an atomic project. The Japanese had one, we had one, the Russians had one. The Russians were the most people that gave us the most espionage problems and everything of that type. Every once in a while you found a dead Russian, some place in Chicago, but that's not our criteria and everything of that type. But what was the question again?

HUMPHREYS: I think that's good. Oh, if you had returned to Japan? You didn't go back there?

VAN KIRK: Yeah.

HUMPHREYS: Did you go back to Hiroshima?

VAN KIRK: We flew up to Tokyo. We collected the Japanese people that were working on their atomic weapon, and we got in the airplane and we flew down to Hiroshima. No place to land near Hiroshima, so we went onto Tokyo where we -- to Nagasaki, where we landed. The thing I remember most about landing in Nagasaki; it was a dirt field, we were landing a C-47 on it, uphill, by the way. The minute we landed the Japanese officer came out to present us his sword. I don't know who had got it, somebody did, and that sort of thing. And then they gave us two, they

were about 1927 model, Chevrolet trucks, to take us into the city of Hiroshima. We got into the Chevrolet trucks … one of the funniest pictures … I have a picture of this by the way, one of the funniest pictures I have is Paul Tibbets explaining to a Japanese guy, who doesn't understand English, how to fix his Chevrolet truck and everything else.

Also, I will point out one of the most pointed pictures I have in my collection is one, I'm there and we are standing near a bus stop in Nagasaki, and it's just, I don't know, 3 degrees and everything else and the bus picks up and stops and this Japanese solider gets off the bus, looking for his home. Now that, folks, is sad. You know, it could have been me looking for my home in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, and that sort of thing. He had no home left. It was gone and everything else. That is sad. That is a reason why we should prevent a war. Amen. [Applause]

HUMPHREYS: Were you escorted by other bombers?

VAN KIRK: We had Chuck Sweeney along to drop instruments. He flew, we flew number one, he flew number two on the left-hand side. We broke off to the right, he broke off the left and that sort of thing, and then we had George Marquart along to take pictures of the explosion. So we had two other airplanes with us up there that day in order to take pictures and to drop instruments. I don't know what those instruments were called. The scientists devised them to measure the force of the blast. I call them bang meters, that's a good of name for any for heaven's sakes and that sort of thing. But anyhow, we had a radio contact between our airplane and his airplane. When the bombs broke, fell out of the plane, and broke the radio contact, the instruments automatically fell out of Chuck's plane and everything else, and then he broke off to the left and everything else.

HUMPHREYS: All right, we've got another one here. Did you have doppler radar altimeters?

VAN KIRK: I didn't even know what they were.

HUMPHREYS: If not, how did you calculate wind and drift at altitude?

VAN KIRK: The old fashioned way, make a turn this way, make a turn this way, get it on three headings and get a good wind from it. That really was the old fashioned way too. I used celestial navigation as long as it was dark. When I no longer could use the celestial navigation, I would shoot the star Arcturus. Arcturus is unique; it is almost always within 60 degrees of the North Pole, and anytime you shoot Arcturus is a very easy calculation to get latitude and you can get latitude and a good speedline from it. That's how I used to dare it, and I was six seconds off. Paul Tibbets said I was 12 seconds off; his watch never was right. [Laughter]

HUMPHREYS: This question's already been answered about methods, celestial or a pressure pattern.

VAN KIRK: Yep.

HUMPHREYS: Pressure pattern right.

VAN KIRK: I never, I never knew – what's pressure pattern?

HUMPHREYS: What were your thoughts when you realized just how powerful the bomb was?

VAN KIRK: Well, you have various thoughts. You are going to kill a lot of civilians, obviously. You regret that, but if you're in a war, you have to have the guts to fight the war to win it. [Applause]

In a war against Japan, we were advancing an amazing invasion fleet. If we would have had to invade Japan, we were going to incur lots and lots and lots and lots of causalities, no question about it. They knew we were coming. They had their guns zeroed right in on the landing strips and everything else. We would have lost lots of men. Dropping the atomic bomb was a lesser of two evils, in, to my way of thinking.

HUMPHREYS: Were you with the 8th Air Force in England or the 15th Air Force in Italy before you were sent to the pacific?

VAN KIRK: Yes. [Laughter]

HUMPHREYS: Both?

VAN KIRK: Both, absolutely, yep.

HUMPHREYS: Is it true that every plane has its own personality?

VAN KIRK: I don't know. I don't think so. I think that back in the old days they did, in the early days, but maybe not later on, I don't think so, no.

HUMPHREYS: I just found out, you flew in Bockscar a quite a few times as well.

VAN KIRK: Oh yeah, I flew them all.

HUMPHREYS: When did you know or find out it was a nuclear mission?

VAN KIRK: I found out about February of that year, '45, and I told you how, you know, you felt a lot of people running around in their uniforms, obviously nuclear scientists. This one guy running around, he is from Harvard and he was deputy commander of our Crescent Project and everything else. Now, if you saw him running around, his picture had been on Time magazine as one of our outstanding young nuclear physicists just months before. You didn't have to have to, you didn't have to have to add two and two to know that you were working on atomic energy. Now, the only question was, did you want to stick with it? That's it, yep.

HUMPHREYS: All right. Which plane did you enjoy more, the B-17 or the B-29?

VAN KIRK: The 29. It ain't one of those pressurized ones, is it?

HUMPHREYS: My son with me today is eight years old. What would you like him to take away most from your mission, i.e. to share with his kids and his grandkids?

VAN KIRK: Don't have another war. [Applause]

You do not win anything, I don't think. You do not win anything in a war. What have we won in Iran? I don't know. They're still killing everyone over there, for Christ's sake, and what have we won in Afghanistan. They're still killing everyone over there and everything of that type. And I, you know, I come as a different section of the country. In California, they couldn't care a less about being military, about ROTC or anything of that type. In Georgia, if you don't belong to the ROTC, you're not living, that sort of thing. It's an entirely different attitude and everything like that. I prefer the Georgia attitude myself. [Applause]

HUMPHREYS: This is a good lead to the next question. Do you feel the military is still a good career choice for young people today?

VAN KIRK: I really do, but I can't get my daughter to agree.

HUMPHREYS: She agrees.

VAN KIRK: Oh, she agrees now, but she won't send her two sons.

HUMPHREYS: Dear Dutch, what other actions did you do before your historic flight over Hiroshima? I think you covered quite a bit of that but I think …

VAN KIRK: Yeah, we did.

HUMPHREYS: I think you should touch base on the mission in North Africa when you bombed some kind of airfield, Luftwaffe airfield down there?

VAN KIRK: Oh, I forgot about that too, yeah. When we got to North Africa, we had six B-17s down there and I guess it was our third day. Tibbets went to a fellow, I forget his name, the British group captain and says, "Group captain, I got six B-17s out here, I should be able to do some good, would you like me to bomb something?" The guy says, "Oh yes, we would love for you to drop bombs on Bizerte." Where the hell is Bizerte, I don't know, and everything of that type. So anyhow, Bizerte was the port the Germans were bringing almost all their materiel in to supply the African Corps during those days. I don't know how they ever brought anything in there; we were bombing it so often.

But in any event, the guy says, "Oh yeah, well you should bomb Bizerte." So Tibbets says, "Well, I need gas and I need bombs." The guy gave us a bomb trailer, and says the bombs are down on a ship. We went down to the ship, carried our own bombs out to the airplane, our own fuel out to the airplane. I am the only guy that ever refueled a B-17 out of five-gallon cans. [Laughter] I think, I am not the only guy, but there is a bunch of, 10 other, six other airplanes, 60 people, that also refueled out of five-gallon cans. Then Tibbets called us together and says, "We're going to bomb Bizerte." He said, "I don't know where we're going to bomb, drop

bombs?" So he says, "Three of our airplanes will drop the bombs over here on this area, and the other three will go and drop the bombs on the docks." And later on we found out that we had dropped a bomb on the mess hall of the German mess when they were in there eating dinner. And we got most of them. We didn't have to bomb, to catch them in the air. Is that all?

HUMPHREYS: I think we just got a couple of – do we have time for a couple more? I think we do. Have you ever had any negative experiences from people when they find out your role?

VAN KIRK: Yes.

HUMPHREYS: Well, they, they started it. I don't even know this means. Do you remember the MGTO of the Enola Gay?

VAN KIRK: The MGTO?

HUMPHREYS: Who gave this question? What does that mean? Takeoff weight.

VAN KIRK: Oh the takeoff way. Oh, of the 17?

HUMPHREYS: No, the B-29.

VAN KIRK: The 29? That was one of our other big worries. We were very heavily overloaded the day we took off with the atomic bomb. We loaded the atomic bomb in the front bomb bay, and then we had to load a bunch of fuel in the back bomb bays in order to get our weight balance right. We were at a gross weight of a 155,000 when we took off that day. Normal gross weight of a B-29 taking off over there, at that particular time, was about a 135,000, so we were very heavily overloaded. If it had been anybody but Tibbets flying that airplane, I would not have gone. I can tell you, I take that back, there is some other pilots in our group, but the problem was, having them flying that airplane, I would not have gone. No, not me, no question about it.

HUMPHREYS: I think this is, we'll make this a last question. What was Jacob Beser's job?

VAN KIRK: I tried to figure that out. No, the bomb exploded at 1800 feet on a radar proximity fuse, which was on a very, operated on a very obscure frequency. If the Japanese had got onto that frequency, by mistake or by air or any other way possible, they could have exploded the bombs in the airplane. That was not a good idea, and everything else. So Jake was along to guard the frequencies and everything else, on the flight and everything like that. He was in the back of the airplane; he could not see out. He wrote a book by the way. He says that some Japanese airplane came up, flew alongside of us a little while, did a slow roll around us and then left. I don't know what he was smoking? [Laughter] I wasn't smoking the same thing, that's all I'm saying. We had no enemy opposition.