

H-Net Reviews

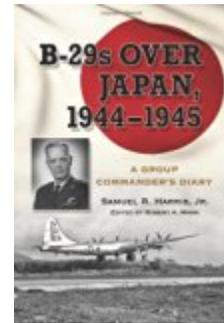
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Samuel R Harris. *Attacking Japan from Saipan: The Diary of A B-29 Group Commander, 1944-1945*. Jefferson: Mcfarland, 2011. 259 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-6297-1.

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Much has been written about the air war over Japan during World War II. *B-29s Over Japan, 1944-1945: A Group Commander's Diary* takes a very personal view of this war. The author, Samuel Russ Harris Jr., was the commanding officer of the 499th Bomb Group, 73rd Bomb Wing, 21st Bomber Command from 1944 to March 1945 during the first B-29 raids over mainland Japan. The framework of this book is the diary written by Harris during his assignment. The diary information is augmented by extensive research conducted by Robert Mann at the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell Air Force Base, where Mann utilized the Individual Aircraft Record Cards and the 73rd Bomb Wing Operations/Planning Staff reports. Unfortunately much of the operational history of the 499th Bomb Group was lost when the aircraft returning these records to the United States crashed shortly after takeoff at the conclusion of World War II.

The organization of this text is relatively straightforward. The first chapter is a development history of the Boeing B-29 Superfortress. From this point it quickly moves to a chronological history of Harris's service with the 499th Bomb Group. In April of 1944 Harris recorded in his diary of the challenges and frustrations in trying to establish and train a new bomb group with a new type of aircraft. This honesty is what makes this book a valuable addition to the library of those interested in the bombing war over Japan. Harris is relieved when General Curtiss LeMay assumes command of the Wing and lowers the bombing altitude in order to achieve better accuracy. Readers will clearly see that Harris was less concerned about overall war aims, but focused squarely on the health and success of his men.

The book is enhanced with Mann's inclusion of some of the key events in the Pacific war, as well as modifications to the production lines of Boeing Superfortress. However, the clear focus is the day-to-day activities of the 499th Bomb Group and the challenges of leading such a group. It is here that readers will see the daily lives of men engaged in the air war over Japan often had down time. During this time men such as Harris worked toward building more furniture for his hut, looked fruit, or enjoyed a get-together at another officer's hut. Routinely this enjoyment was interrupted by Japanese attacks, or waiting for word of the crews lost during raids.

Harris had already been a member of the U.S. Army Air Corps for some fifteen years prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor which brought the United States into World War II. This background is reflected in Harris's honesty in Wing debriefing following a number of the raids on Japan. In one example, Harris noted that during the debrief of January 15, 1945, with the exception of himself, all of the group commanders of the 73rd Bomb Wing reported an excellent job, "But not one bomb hit the target. How come if three Groups functioned so prettily?" (p. 174). In this commentary, we see officers concerned about making themselves look good, yet there is a lack of honesty in the reporting of the mission. The same problem would plague the United States through the Vietnam War and later.

While this book is a valuable addition to the literature of the air war over Japan, it does have some serious flaws. The first and most obvious is that at times the text is difficult to read because Mann tries to include too much information. Many times Mann provides the data from materials at the Air Force Historical Research

Agency (AFHRA), without an effort to interpret the material. While he does provide a key to reading the material from the AFHRA in his introduction, it would have been very beneficial for this data to be put into context. The author could have worked around this challenge by selecting fewer events to highlight, allowing him to expand more fully upon the critical events in the history of the group. While the raw data is cumbersome to the reader, it is invaluable to historians because Mann has now made it available to all without a journey to Maxwell Air Force Base. Due to the emphasis on the experiences of Harris, it is difficult to gain a more complete understanding of the operational availability of each of the bomb squadrons in the group. Inserting the operational status of each squadron would have proven very beneficial to assisting readers in placing Harris's experiences into the overall context of the bomber war over Japan.

With the exception of Harris' own direct staff,

squadron commanders, and a few pilots, the reader is left wondering about the men of the bomb group. Harris rarely spoke of the men responsible for carrying out the missions, echoing the "top down" view of so many military histories. With that being said, at several points through the text Harris is faced with the realities of having to admit that men that he personally likes are not capable of performing assigned tasks or just aren't good pilots. In this way the book is a valuable addition to the field, as commanders rarely discuss this difficult issue of leadership.

In conclusion, this book does contribute to the understanding of leadership during the air war against Japan by presenting one group commander's perspective. In addition, while difficult to decipher, there is a wealth of information pertaining to the aircraft status of the group. This book would make a good starting point for someone interested in the 499th Bomb Group.

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