

WARNING: THIS CLIP, AND ITS DESCRIPTION, CONTAIN DISTURBING WORDS AND HISTORICAL FOOTAGE OF WAR AND THE DROPPING OF FIRE BOMBS OVER JAPAN. PROCEED WITH CAUTION.

By the fall of 1944, American military leaders realized that Japan would be unwilling to surrender. Vicious battles between the two sides, on several Pacific islands, convinced military planners (like General LeMay) to take drastic measures.

Before the Allies captured territories close to Japan's home islands, B-29 bomb runs were not as effective as military strategists had hoped. For one thing, B-29s were not always able to drop their bombs on intended targets. Although crew members used an effective bomb aimer - the Norden - that device did not perform well when low-lying clouds shrouded the ground below.

The first B-29s to attack Tokyo flew over the city on the 24th of November, 1944. American pilots, flying a total of 111 B-29s, took-off from the Mariana Islands, about 1,500 miles away. Twenty-four of those planes found their targets.

On the 29th of November, 1944, B-29s began to regularly drop bombs on Japan. Tokyo, a city whose buildings were mostly made of wood at that time, was a prime target.

General Curtis LeMay wanted to significantly damage any Japanese city or town where residents were producing war materials. Not until the Allies captured places like Iwo Jima, however, were air raids over Tokyo successful. Using air bases closer to Japan, Allied escort planes were able to fly with the B-29s, providing some protection against anti-aircraft attacks.

Tokyo was the target of a massive bomb run on the evening of March 10, 1945. Although the battle for Iwo Jima was not-yet over, the Allies had enough control of the island to use its air bases. The plan was to send-in the planes at night, when Japanese home-island forces would not be expecting a raid. The planes would fly low - very low - between 5,000 to 8,000 feet.

LeMay wanted his air crews to sweep their intended targets - including large areas of Tokyo - with incendiary bombs. Spreading fires would help to cripple the city and its war-making efforts.

What did the planes drop on Tokyo that night (and in the nights to come)? The incendiary weapons were called M-69s. Weighing about six pounds each, they were dropped in a cluster of thirty-eight within each single container. Each B-29 typically carried about 37 containers, which means that every plane carried around 1,400 bombs

Once the bombs were away from the plane, a time fuse released them from their containers. That typically happened around 5,000 feet. When the bombs hit the ground, they exploded. After they exploded, they released a type of highly flammable compound.

More than 300 B-29s made the raid over Tokyo the night of March 10th. They flew to Tokyo under cover of darkness, reaching the city just before dawn. They flew at 7,000 feet - a much-lower altitude than Tokyo's defenders would have expected since the heavy bombers usually flew at 30,000 feet.

The raid devastated Tokyo. Allied reconnaissance photos revealed that at least 16 square miles of the city was destroyed. Major factories and other war-supporting businesses were consumed in a firestorm. Historians estimate that about 100,000 people died in the raid with another 100,000 people injured.

The Allied bomb-run was carried-out by Americans. Fourteen American B-29s were lost in the mission.

A Japanese eyewitness - Fusako Sasaki - later reported the damage he saw:

Stacked-up corpses were being hauled away on lorries. Everywhere there was the stench of the dead and of smoke. I saw the places on the pavement where people had been roasted to death. At last I comprehended first-hand what an air-raid meant. I turned back, sick and scared. Later I learned that 40% of Tokyo was burned that night, that there had been 100,000 casualties and 375,000 left homeless.

A month after the March raid, while I was on a visit to Honjo on a particularly beautiful cherry-blossom day, I saw bloated and charred corpses surfacing in the Sumida River. I felt nauseated and even more scared than before.

We ourselves were burned out in the fire raid of May 25th, 1945. As I ran I kept my eyes on the sky. It was like a fireworks display as the incendiaries exploded. People were aflame, rolling and writhing in agony, screaming piteously for help, but beyond all mortal assistance.

This clip - from the documentary "World War II Battlefront" - features a segment on "The Last Stronghold (November, 1944)." It is not easy to watch.

See, also:

[Bombing Japan - Incendiary Bombs Over Tokyo, Part 2](#)

[Bombing Japan - Incendiary Bombs Over Tokyo, Part 3](#)

[Bombing Japan - Incendiary Bombs Over Tokyo, Part 4](#)

Credits:

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