



CHAPTER ONE

As the *Enola Gay* sped its way along one of Tinian Island's four 8,500-foot runways, bombardier Arden Hennessey replayed in his mind the events of the last year that had led to this moment. The reason he was engaging in this mental distraction was to keep his mind off the fact that the B-29 Superfortress Bomber in which he would hopefully soon be flying was nearly seven tons overweight, resulting from the 10 and a half-foot Little Boy bomb it was carrying and the 7,000 gallons of gasoline required to fly to Japan and back.

If weight was not sufficient cause for concern, then perhaps the nearby remnants of four recently crashed B-29s might have given one pause, their presence made all the more disconcerting by virtue of the current surplus weight of the *Enola Gay*.

Finally, if anyone onboard needed further reason to fidget the rosary beads there was the curiously named 9,000-pound Little Boy himself, and if his moniker did not do justice to the actual bulk of this atomic payload, there was this salient fact: if the *Enola Gay* crashed on takeoff, setting off its bomb, most of Tinian Island, hundreds of bombers, Manhattan Project scientists, crews and the plutonium core for the next atomic bomb would exist only in memory. Such being the case, it had been decided to arm the bomb in midair. But who could say for sure what might happen should the plane not become airborne?

Arming the bomb in flight, a tricky maneuver glaringly lacking in precedent, would be performed by the ever-exacting bomb commander, William “Deak” Parsons. Arden had heard that Parsons’s brother had lost part of his face at Iwo Jima and hoped this horrific sidebar would help steady both the Navy Captain’s hands and his nerves come time to arm the bomb.

The bomb. The very reason for this flight, assuming it got off the ground. Fortified with 85 pounds of highly enriched weapons-grade uranium, Little Boy was intended as the ultimate exclamation point on the concept of total war. There were three potential targets, the final decision as to which to be made based on cloud coverage. The primary target would be the urban industrial area of Hiroshima, its status augmented by a lack of reported POW camps. First alternate would be Kokura. Second, Nagasaki. If all three cities were obscured by clouds, Little Boy would be disarmed in midair and returned to Tinian. Weather would thus rule the day. Arden had no problem with this directive. Having been briefed two days earlier as to what the mission would entail, he had confided to navigator Theodore “Dutch” van Kirk, “Considering what we’re dropping, I suppose we should be sure where we’re dropping it.”

Van Kirk responded with a lame chuckle, offered solely to avoid appearing as if he had completely ignored what had just been said to him. After that, Arden kept his thoughts to himself, realizing two seconds too late that the mood upon exiting the briefing room seemed only fit for silence. Such was the magnitude of what had been communicated to those present.

The seven crews that would fly the August 6 mission, along with assorted scientists, Navy personnel and a high-ranking general, had gathered on wooden benches at 4:00 p.m. in the Operations Briefing Room of the 509th Compound on Tinian Island. Security entering the Quonset hut was tight, with armed military police checking every man’s identification.

Colonel Paul W. Tibbets, Jr., standing at the front of the room, turned to face approximately 80 men. Clad in khaki shorts and

Part Two ~ Chapter One

matching short-sleeve shirt, he said nothing, allowing his mere presence to silence the chitchat. While not lacking in a sense of humor, the dark haired 30-year-old was a results-oriented pragmatist who exuded the *gravitas* so fitting the upcoming mission. He possessed a studiousness that flourished upon firing up his pipe. His smiles came in disarming flashes, escapees from an otherwise impassive face. Nobody, however, contested the fact that “Mr. B-29” - as some called him - was the right man for the job.

The job, heading the 509th Composite Group, had begun in November a year earlier. The bulk of it involved selecting and training the finest personnel possible for a mission that would - so they were told - shorten the war, details to be provided on a need-to-know basis. Arden and “Dutch” van Kirk had been chosen early, having flown extensively with Tibbets in Europe. Now, the stakes would be even higher.