



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

B-29 Super Fortress

The B-29 Super Fortress¹

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Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. This week, I crossed an item off my bucket list: to see the B-29 airplane. There was another item relating to this goal: to fly in a B-29. I kicked the first bucket item from my list, but not the second.

From my childhood years, I had thought of this airplane as a supernatural vessel, a mystical aerial ark. It seemed impregnable. And it almost was. By the time it was in operation in WWII, the German and Japan air forces had been decimated. Their remaining planes could fly only limited missions and short distances because of fuel shortages.

Anyway, the plane seemed so large I wondered how only four engines could put it into the air. I was not versed in aerodynamics to understand that it might have had something to do with its huge wings.

The plane's guns justified its nickname: Superfortress. All around the plane: Side gunners, belly gunners, top gunners, tail gunners. My kind of airplane, the more guns, the better.



My greatest fantasy was to pretend I was sitting in the front of the airplane, the place for the bombardier. The figure to the left shows that the front of the plane was mostly windows. Just imagine that view. I thought, *I would be paid to do this!*

I could visualize my sighting-in a Kraut factory or a Nip airbase and shouting “bombs away!” to the person in the plane who was supposed to drop the bombs.² I pretended that I not only shouted “bombs away,” I opened the bomb bay doors, and pushed the lever (Hit the button? Pulled the cord?) to drop the bombs.

The B-29 was instrumental in bringing Germany and Japan to the surrender tables. It carried the atomic bombs that were dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Later, its body served as an aerial launching pad for smaller airplanes that soared into the upper atmosphere. The B-29 flew so high that it had a pressurized cabin. It could ascend to heights of 31,000 feet, considered revolutionary at that time. Most of the enemies' fighters in WWII, what was left of them, could not reach this altitude.

As a ten-year-old-kid, I recall visiting Hodge's Sporting Goods in my hometown and looking wistfully at the model of this bomber. Somehow, someone bought it for me. I assembled it, all the while thinking about its wondrous exploits.

This week, the only operational B-29 in the world landed in Palm Springs, California, a few miles from where I live in the winter. Even at my advanced age, I was thrilled. I could hardly wait to drive to the Palm Springs Air Museum, where this historic icon was on display.

Even more, for five hundred to fifteen hundred dollars, I could take a short flight in the airplane. Such a deal! And unlike today's commercial airborne exploitations, I would not be charged for bringing along extra luggage, such as the clothes on my back. The seat price depended on its location. The bombardier seat was the most expensive, around \$1,500. The crew seats ran for about \$500.

In for a dime, in for a few hundred dollars. What's the use of having an item on a bucket list, if we are not able to kick it off the list?

One way to enjoy life comes down to creating moments of fantasy about what *might* be. They may never be met, but the very fact that we can dream beyond our everyday existence says something about ourselves. I decided to go for the bombardier's seat, but I had waited too long. By the time I attempted to make a reservation through a Web page, another Walter Mitty had preempted me. Other illusionists of the past had preempted my fantasy by reserving the other places. So, I settled for a (grounded) ground tour.



Arriving at the museum and walking from the parking lot to the museum entrance, I spotted the tail of the B-29, as seen in the photo to the left. The vertical stabilizer was unmistakably that of the B-29. Back in my childhood days, I had seen it many times in movies and in my Hodge's Sporting Goods model.

The visualizations in my mind brought forth fanciful memories. But as I made my way to the museum, I laughed at myself. I was holding onto childhood fantasies. I was not ten years old. I was sixty-three years away from those day dreams.

Yet I like to think we humans keep ourselves somewhat intact by harboring and savoring memories about our robust youth, and bringing forth those memories as we come to resemble a faint model of our former selves. I also believe that if we do not take the time in our youthful days to explore and delight in our explorations, we risk consigning ourselves to a later life of regret, even boredom. What's to remember if we do not provide our memory banks with data?



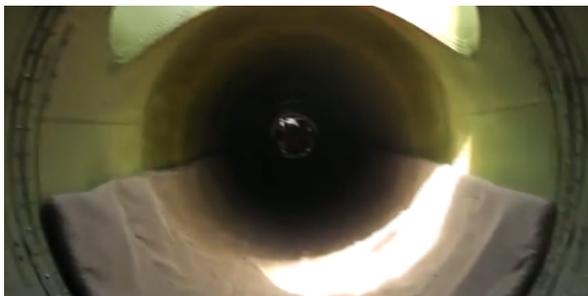
Upon paying my fee and entering the queue to see the plane, I was told I had arrived at an advantageous time. The line I was in was about 100 feet long. Earlier in the afternoon, the line was almost the length of a football field. My queue is shown in the photo to the left.

It was a hot day. The line was slow going. I thought the delay came from the long time it took to explore the body of the plane all the way back to the tail gunner position. It did not matter.



I was pumped! As the line shortened, as I came in contact with my bucket list item, I began to snap pictures of the wheels, the tail, the body, the propellers, the huge wings, the back of the plane where the tail gunner did his job, the fuel boost pumps outlets, the... other people in the queue began to cast side glances at my taking pictures of the plane's rivets.

Again, it did not matter. I suspected many of my fellow queue members were also Walter Mittys. They could appreciate the value of any picture of a B-29.



The trip through the plane was not what I expected or hoped for. We were not allowed to crawl in a metal tube through the length of the plane to reach the tail, as seen here. That was a reasonable restriction, but we were also not allowed to stand in the cockpit. It had a barrier and a security guard. OK, after all, it is a functioning airplane.

I entered the plane through one of the bomb bay doors. This bay was outfitted with several bombs that were examples of typical payloads, as seen in this photo on the left. The right photo shows part of the cockpit.



That was it. My bucket list was one item shorter. I had expected a tour guide and asked one of the guards why there wasn't one.

- "We tried it for a while. But the time to get through the plane was around 15 to 20 minutes. The waiting lines outside snaked around blocks. By the time people got through the bomb bay doors, they were ready to drop their own bombs!"
- "Yeah, I can see your point. Maybe you should consider having different kinds of tours and at different prices."
- "Well, you could take a flight."
- "I tried. Your Web site had all places sold."
- "Not so. We were booked full all the days of the flights 'till now, but we still have some places for tomorrow."
- "Tomorrow! The site said today (Sunday) was the last day."
- "Nope. Flights are set up for tomorrow and then we leave Tuesday. I think you confused the ground tours with the flying tours."

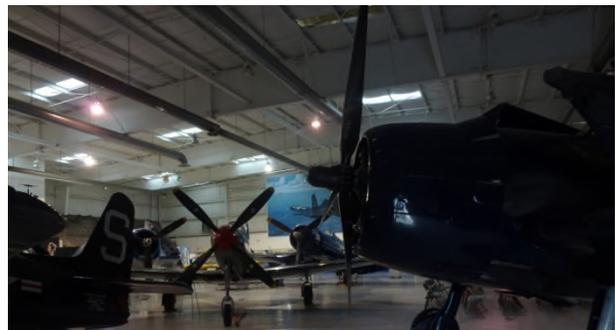
By the time I had a chance to book a place the next day, all slots were full, at least that is what I picked up from the Web site. In for a dime...but several hundred dollars saved...which I would have gladly spent. In hindsight, I should have used their toll free number. No matter, the plane will be back next year.



I left the plane and walked around to its front, as seen in the figure to the left. There it was, my imaginary bombardier's seat courtesy, of my inability to read a Web page. There's an old saying that goes something like this: Every path has a puddle. I was the puddle in my path to ride in a B-29, to fulfill a far-fetched dream.

My bucket list lost one item today. I'll wait for next year to kick another. Besides, I have quite a number of other items on my bucket list. I hope you can say the same. And let's never let our bucket list go empty.

By the time I had finished my visit with the B-29, the museum had closed. I walked through one of the exhibit rooms on my way to the exit. The room was darkened, as seen below



The crowds were gone. The guards were elsewhere. No chatter. No noise. The airplanes seemed to be standing as silent sentries to history.

As I slowly made my way past these famous symbols of WWII, I wondered if Japan, Germany, or Italy had similar museums? Probably not, at least not to the extent they exist in America. I thought about a well known quote made by George Orwell. He said that history is written by the winners. I disagree. Japan, Germany, and Italy have their own interpretations about WWII. Perhaps an alteration to Mr. Orwell's idea might capture the idea about this place: War museums are constructed by the winners.

As I was leaving the museum, I walked by the gift shop. I fought off my temptation to buy a B-29 T-Shirt. It was not an easy thing to do, but my T-Shirt Anonymous pledge held up. I even resisted buying a clock with a picture of a B-29 on its face...in spite of its beautiful body.



Your on the Street Reporter

¹ Statistics and photos are sourced from my photos, Wikipedia (key in B-29), and <http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=b-29&qpv=b-29&FORM=IQFRML>

² No offence intended. These names were commonly used during our wars with Germany and Japan.