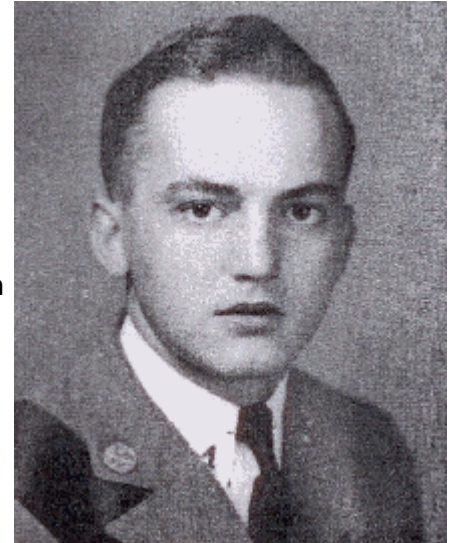


The Deadliest Raid

In Europe, the Germans were in a disciplined retreat, blowing up Rhine River bridges to delay the Allies' inevitable march into what remained of Hitler's Thousand Year Reich. But on the other side of the world in March 1945, the war was heating up.

In the Pacific, the Army Air Forces had attempted to employ the daylight precision bombing which had caused such great damage to Germany. But the weather over the Japanese home islands made visual bombing impractical. Favorable weather occurred only a few days each month. The problem was further aggravated by a 150 mile-an-hour jet stream. These hurricane-force winds scattered the bombs dropped from the high operational altitudes flown by the Army Air Forces B-29 bombers.

General Curtis LeMay, commander of XXI Bomber Command switched tactics, ordering night attacks from altitudes of only 7,000 feet and targeting major cities which his very heavy B-29 bombers could find in the dark. Many of the buildings in the cities were constructed of wood and paper, making the target areas particularly susceptible to incendiary bombs.



The first major incendiary raid on Tokyo came on the night of February 23-24, 1945 when 174 B-29s destroyed one square mile of the city. Building on that success, LeMay's planners scheduled a return trip to the enemy capital for March 9-10. More than 330 heavy bombers rumbled through the dark sky carrying cargoes of devastating incendiary bombs. Among the airmen guiding the bombers was First Lieutenant Wesley Oliver Chandler of Hickory, North Carolina.

Chandler graduated from Clemson with a civil engineering degree in 1940. At Clemson, he was a member of ASCE, served as a second lieutenant in the cadet brigade and attended ROTC summer training at Camp McClellan, Alabama. Now, Chandler was assigned to the 52nd Bomb Squadron flying from Guam.



The distance between the squadron's home field and Tokyo stretched the range of the big B-29 bombers. To allow a margin of safety, some of the aircraft's defensive armaments were removed. At this point in the war, the Japanese night fighter and anti-aircraft capabilities were so limited as to justify the risk. As the navigator aboard the B-29 "Cherry—the Horizontal Cat," Chandler was flying his third combat mission. He would have provided

pilot First Lieutenant Firman Wyatt with course headings, position reports and weather updates as the B-29's four 16-foot propellers pulled it through the darkness.

Hundreds of B-29s dropped 1,700 tons of bombs on Tokyo that night. Sixteen square miles of the city were destroyed and 100,000 people were believed killed. The damage was worst in the areas east of the Imperial Palace. The raid, labeled "Operation Meetinghouse" by Air Force planners, remains the most destructive conventional raid and the single deadliest bombing mission in military history, surpassing even the atomic missions over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The wood and paper construction caused fires to spread quickly and grow into raging infernos. The heat was so intense that glass melted and the water in the city's rivers boiled. Towering columns of roiling air, caused by the high winds created by the fires, are believed to have brought down some of the attacking B-29s. Three of the attacking aircraft crashed in the Zao Mountains of Miyagi Prefecture, including Chandler's which crashed into Mount Fubo.

During the last seven months of the Pacific war, the United States strategic bombing of Japan resulted in the destruction of 67 Japanese cities and as many as 500,000 Japanese deaths. Emperor Hirohito's viewing of the destroyed areas of Tokyo following the March 9-10 raid is said to have been the beginning of his personal involvement in the peace process which led to Japan's unconditional surrender in August.

Wesley Oliver Chandler is one of the thousands who lost his life to bring about Japan's capitulation. He was survived by his wife Norma Lee and their son Ronald Wesley.