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Studs Terkel: We're seated here, two old gaffers. Me and Paul Tibbets, 89 years old, brigadier-general retired, in his home town of Columbus, Ohio, where has lived for many years.

Paul Tibbets: Hey, you've got to correct that. I'm only 87. You said 89.

ST: I know. See, I'm 90. So I got you beat by three years. Now we've had a nice lunch, you and I and your companion. I noticed as we sat in that restaurant, people passed by. They didn't know who you were. But once upon a time, you flew a plane called the Enola Gay over the city of Hiroshima, in Japan, on a Sunday morning - August 6 1945 - and a bomb fell. It was the atomic bomb, the first ever. And that particular moment changed the whole world around. You were the pilot of that plane.

PT: Yes, I was the pilot.

ST: And the Enola Gay was named after...

PT: My mother. She was Enola Gay Haggard before she married my dad, and my dad never supported me with the flying - he hated airplanes and motorcycles. When I told them I was going to leave college and go fly planes in the army air corps, my dad said, "Well, I've sent you through school, bought you automobiles, given you money to run around with the girls, but from here on, you're on your own. If you want to go kill yourself, go ahead, I don't give a damn." Then Mom just quietly said, "Paul, if you want to go fly airplanes, you're going to be all right." And that was that.

ST: Now by 1944 you were a pilot - a test pilot on the programme to develop the B-29 bomber. When did you get word that you had a special assignment?

PT: One day [in September 1944] I'm running a test on a B-29, I land, a man meets me. He says he just got a call from General Uzal Ent [commander of the second air force] at Colorado Springs, he wants me in his office the next morning at nine o'clock. He said, "Bring your clothing - your B4 bag - because you're not coming back." Well, I didn't know what it was and didn't pay any attention to it - it was just another assignment. I got to Colorado Springs the next morning perfectly on time. A man named Lansdale met me, walked me to General Ent's office and closed the door behind me. With him was a man wearing a blue suit, a US Navy captain - that was William Parsons, who flew with me to Hiroshima - and Dr Norman Ramsey, Columbia University professor in nuclear physics. And Norman said: "OK, we've got what we call the Manhattan Project. What we're doing is trying to develop an atomic bomb. We've gotten to the point now where we can't go much further till we have airplanes to work with."

He gave me an explanation which probably lasted 45, 50 minutes, and they left. General Ent looked at me and said, "The other day, General Arnold [commander general of the army air corps] offered me three names." Both of the others were full colonels; I was lieutenant-colonel. He said that when General Arnold asked which of them could do this atomic weapons deal, he replied without hesitation, "Paul Tibbets is the man to do it." I said, "Well, thank you, sir." Then he laid out what was going on and it was up to me now to put together an organization and train them to drop atomic weapons on both Europe and the Pacific - Tokyo.

ST: Did Oppenheimer tell you about the destructive nature of the bomb?

PT: No.

ST: How did you know about that?

PT: From Dr Ramsey. He said the only thing we can tell you about it is, it's going to explode with the force of 20,000 tons of TNT. I'd never seen 1lb of TNT blow up. I'd never heard of anybody who'd seen 100lbs of TNT blow up. All I felt was that this was gonna be one hell of a big bang.

ST: Twenty thousand tons - that's equivalent to how many planes full of bombs?

PT: Well, I think the two bombs that we used [at Hiroshima and Nagasaki] had more power than all the bombs the air force had used during the war on Europe.

ST: So Ramsey told you about the possibilities.

PT: Even though it was still theory, whatever those guys told me, that's what happened. So I was ready to say I wanted to go to war, but I wanted to ask Oppenheimer how to get away from the bomb after we dropped it. I told him that when we had dropped bombs in Europe and North Africa, we'd flown straight ahead after dropping them - which is also the trajectory of the bomb. But what should we do this time? He said, "You can't fly straight ahead because you'd be right over the top when it blows up and nobody would ever know you were there." He said I had to turn tangent to the expanding shockwave. I said, "Well, I've had some trigonometry, some physics. What is tangency in this case?" He said it was 159 degrees in either direction. "Turn 159 degrees as fast as you can and you'll be able to put yourself the greatest distance from where the bomb exploded."

ST: How many seconds did you have to make that turn?

PT: I had dropped enough practice bombs to realize that the charges would blow around 1,500ft in the air, so I would have 40 to 42 seconds to turn 159 degrees. I went back to Wendover as quick as I could and took the airplane up. I got myself to 25,000ft, and I practiced turning, steeper, steeper, steeper and I got it where I could pull it round in 40 seconds. The tail was shaking dramatically and I was afraid of it breaking off, but I didn't quit. That was my goal. And I practiced and practiced until, without even thinking about it, I could do it in between 40 and 42, all the time. So, when that day came...

ST: You got the go-ahead on August 5.

PT: Yeah. We were in Tinian [the US island base in the Pacific] at the time we got the OK. They had sent this Norwegian to the weather station out on Guam [the US's westernmost territory] and I had a copy of his report. We said that, based on his forecast, the sixth day of August would be the best day that we could get over Honshu [the island on which Hiroshima stands]. So we did everything that had to be done to get the crews ready to go: airplane loaded, crews briefed, all of the things checked that you have to check before you can fly over enemy territory.

General Groves had a brigadier-general who was connected back to Washington DC by a special teletype machine. He stayed close to that thing all the time, notifying people back there, all by code, that we were preparing these airplanes to go any time after midnight on the sixth. And that's the way it worked out. We were ready to go at about four o'clock in the afternoon on the fifth and we got word from the president that we were free to go: "Use 'em as you wish." They give you a time you're supposed to drop your bomb on target and that was 9.15 in the morning, but that was Tinian time, one hour later than Japanese time. I told Dutch, "You figure it out what time we have to start after midnight to be over the target at 9am."

ST: That'd be Sunday morning.

PT: Well, we got going down the runway at right about 2.15am and we took off, we met our rendezvous guys, we made our flight up to what we call the initial point, that would be a geographic position that you could not mistake. Well, of course we had the best one in the world with the rivers and bridges and that big shrine. There was no mistaking what it was.

ST: So you had to have the right navigator to get it on the button.

PT: The airplane has a bomb sight connected to the autopilot and the bombardier puts figures in there for where he wants to be when he drops the weapon, and that's transmitted to the airplane. We always took into account what would happen if we had a failure and the bomb bay doors didn't open: we had a manual release put in each airplane so it was right down by the bombardier and he could pull on that. And the guys in the airplanes that followed us to drop the instruments needed to know when it was going to go. We were told not to use the radio, but, hell, I had to. I told them I would say, "One minute out," "Thirty seconds out," "Twenty seconds" and "Ten" and then I'd count, "Nine, eight, seven, six, five, four seconds", which would give them a time to drop their cargo. They knew what was going on because they knew where we were. And that's exactly the way it worked, it was absolutely perfect.

After we got the airplanes in formation I crawled into the tunnel and went back to tell the men, I said, "You know what we're doing today?" They said, "Well, yeah, we're going on a bombing mission." I said, "Yeah, we're going on a bombing mission, but it's a little bit special." My tailgunner, Bob Caron, was pretty alert. He said, "Colonel, we wouldn't be playing with atoms today, would we?" I said, "Bob, you've got it just exactly right." So I went back up in the front end and I told the navigator, bombardier, flight engineer, in turn. I said, "OK, this is an atom bomb we're dropping." They listened intently but I didn't see any change in their faces or anything else. Those guys were no idiots. We'd been fiddling round with the most peculiar-shaped things we'd ever seen.

So we're coming down. We get to that point where I say "one second" and by the time I'd got that second out of my mouth the airplane had lurched, because 10,000lbs had come out of the front. I'm in this turn now, tight as I can get it, that helps me hold my altitude and helps me hold my airspeed and everything else all the way round. When I level out, the nose is a little bit high and as I look up there the whole sky is lit up in the prettiest blues and pinks I've ever seen in my life. It was just great.

I tell people I tasted it. "Well," they say, "what do you mean?" When I was a child, if you had a cavity in your tooth the dentist put some mixture of some cotton or whatever it was and lead into your teeth and pounded them in with a hammer. I learned that if I had a spoon of ice-cream and touched one of those teeth I got this electrolysis and I got the taste of lead out of it. And I knew right away what it was.

OK, we're all going. We had been briefed to stay off the radios: "Don't say a damn word, what we do is we make this turn, we're going to get out of here as fast as we can." I want to get out over the sea of Japan because I know they can't find me over there. With that done we're home free. Then Tom Ferebee has to fill out his bombardier's report and Dutch, the navigator, has to fill out a log. Tom is working on his log and says, "Dutch, what time were we over the target?" And Dutch says, "Nine-fifteen plus 15 seconds." Ferebee says: "What lousy navigating. Fifteen seconds off!"

ST: Did you hear an explosion?

PT: Oh yeah. The shockwave was coming up at us after we turned. And the tail gunner said, "Here it comes." About the time he said that, we got this kick in the ass. I had accelerometers installed in all airplanes to record the magnitude of the bomb. It hit us with two and a half G. Next day, when we got figures from the scientists on what they had learned from all the things, they said, "When that bomb exploded, your airplane was 10 and half miles away from it."

ST: Did you see that mushroom cloud?

PT: You see all kinds of mushroom clouds, but they were made with different types of bombs. The Hiroshima bomb did not make a mushroom. It was what I call a stringer. It just came up. It was black as hell, and it had light and colours and white in it and grey colour in it and the top was like a folded-up Christmas tree.

ST: Do you have any idea what happened down below?

PT: Pandemonium! I think it's best stated by one of the historians, who said: "In one micro-second, the city of Hiroshima didn't exist."

ST: Do you ever have any second thoughts about the bomb?

PT: Second thoughts? No. Studs, look. Number one, I got into the air corps to defend the United States to the best of my ability. That's what I believe in and that's what I work for. Number two, I'd had so much experience with airplanes... I'd had jobs where there was no particular direction about how you do it and then of course I put this thing together with my own thoughts on how it should be because when I got the directive I was to be self-supporting at all times.

On the way to the target I was thinking: I can't think of any mistakes I've made. Maybe I did make a mistake: maybe I was too damned assured. At 29 years of age I was so shot in the ass with confidence I didn't think there was anything I couldn't do. Of course, that applied to airplanes and people. So, no, I had no problem with it. I knew we did the right thing because when I knew we'd be doing that I thought, yes, we're going to kill a lot of people, but by God we're going to save a lot of lives. We won't have to invade [Japan].

ST: Why did they drop the second one, the Bockscar [bomb] on Nagasaki?

PT: Unknown to anybody else - I knew it, but nobody else knew - there was a third one. See, the first bomb went off and they didn't hear anything out of the Japanese for two or three days. The second bomb was dropped and again they were silent for another couple of days. Then I got a phone call from General Curtis LeMay [chief of staff of the strategic air forces in the Pacific]. He said, "You got another one of those damn things?" I said, "Yessir." He said, "Where is it?" I said, "Over in Utah." He said, "Get it out here. You and your crew are going to fly it." I said, "Yessir." I sent word back and the crew loaded it on an airplane and we headed back to bring it right on out to Trinian and when they got it to California debarkation point, the war was over.

ST: What did General LeMay have in mind with the third one?

PT: Nobody knows.