

Veterans of the 509th Composite Group



ATOMIC VETERANS INCENSED OVER FALSE CLAIMS IN NEW BOOK

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The veterans who were responsible for flying the planes that dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima in August 1945 are incensed about claims made in a recently published book, *Last Train from Hiroshima* by Charles Pellegrino. The military organization that was responsible for the bombing missions on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was known as the 509th Composite Group, headed by Col. Paul W. Tibbets, the pilot of the *Enola Gay*.

The book is rife with errors; take this one as a start. Pellegrino falsely claims that a radiation accident took place in the Tinian Island assembly shed containing the Hiroshima-mission atomic bomb (nicknamed "Little Boy") on the evening of August 4th that resulted in the death of a young (unnamed) civilian scientist. Author Pellegrino speculates this might explain why "even Tibbets became sick at the time of the Hiroshima mission, and was bed-ridden on Tinian during the Nagasaki mission." *Enola Gay* Navigator Major Theodore J. Van Kirk vehemently denies that claim. "Tibbets was never sick during the Hiroshima mission and was never bed-ridden during the Nagasaki mission. This is utterly preposterous."

In his book, author Pellegrino claims Los Alamos scientist Luis Alvarez participated in the final assembly of the Little Boy atomic bomb. He states that a portion of the uranium assembly had “surged long enough to reduce the weapon’s efficiency” to the point of it acting like a “dud” when dropped on Hiroshima. Nothing could have been further from the truth. According to a Los Alamos document in the National Archives, all of the uranium and the four initiators had been inserted into Little Boy on July 30th (five days before the falsely alleged August 4th accident) and “no further handling of these parts was necessary.” While the nuclear components were not touched again, the bomb casing was opened after that date only to install fresh batteries just before it was rolled out of the assembly building on August 5th and placed inside the *Enola Gay*.

Retired scientist Richard Malenfant devoted most of his long Los Alamos career studying not only the Little Boy atomic bomb, but its effects on the residents of Hiroshima. Referring to what he had read, Malenfant wrote “The observations regarding Little Boy and the Hiroshima mission are ridiculous fabrications and attempts to revise history. They don’t even make interesting science fiction. The radiation effects described in the book are generally not factual.” He added, “There is no merit in Pellegrino's work.”

Alan Carr, the official historian at the Los Alamos weapons laboratory where the Little Boy bomb was produced in 1945, said that the book “read more like a technically dubious piece of science fiction than a historical rendering of actual events.” He said that there was no accident or technical failure. John Coster-Mullen, widely-recognized author of *Atom Bombs, The Top Secret Inside Story of Little Boy and Fat Man*, agreed and said that Pellegrino’s book “contained so many errors and outright falsifications as to make it a work of fiction.”

Mr. Pellegrino claims in his book that a person named Joseph Fuoco flew on a B-29 escort plane, named *Necessary Evil* that was to take photographs of the Hiroshima explosion. He writes that Fuoco, at the last minute, was “transferred from his beloved, battle-hardened plane *Bad Penny*” and replaced Flight Engineer Sgt. James R. Corliss aboard *Necessary Evil* by orders of Colonel Costalati.

The official records containing the names of the over 1,800 members of the 509th Composite Group show that no person named Joseph Fuoco was

ever a part of the 509th much less on the airplane. There is no record of a “Colonel Costalati” being present on Tinian in connection with the 509th nor does the name Joseph Fuoco appear on the *Bad Penny* crew lists. Any last minute crew changes on *Necessary Evil* would have been recommended to Colonel Tibbets by the Airplane Commander Capt. George W. Marquardt, whom author Pellegrino also misspelled “Marquart” throughout this book.

Fellow crew member Russell E. Gackenbach was stationed within arm’s reach of actual Flight Engineer James Corliss inside *Necessary Evil* and is astounded that some imposter has put himself on the plane and that Pellegrino would not have bothered to easily check to see if it was true. Mr. Gackenbach wrote, “As the Navigator of the *Necessary Evil* on August 6, 1945, I can attest to the fact that James Corliss was the Flight Engineer on our plane as it accompanied Colonel Tibbets on the raid on Hiroshima. James Corliss did not get sick and was not replaced by Joseph Fuoco. In fact I never knew a Joseph Fuoco.”

Another crew member who flew on the Hiroshima mission is equally upset. Major Theodore J. Van Kirk, Navigator on the *Enola Gay*, said, “I am outraged! I have never heard of Joseph Fuoco. He was never around the 509th and his story is a complete fabrication.”

For the record, since Joseph Fuoco was never a member of the 509th and thus not connected in any way with the Hiroshima mission, any statements and descriptions made by him and quoted in this book about what he allegedly did on that mission, what he saw out the window of *Necessary Evil*, statements made to him before, during, and after the mission by members of the 509th, along with any claims by him to be in 509th group photos and any participation in 509th post strike crew interviews, are completely fraudulent and without any merit whatsoever.

Pellegrino also states in his book that, “In private moments, friends reported that Tibbets was occasionally horrified by what he had seen over Hiroshima.” *Enola Gay* Navigator Van Kirk was a lifelong close personal friend of Tibbets and served with him on almost 60 World War II combat missions. He was especially incensed by what he considers to be a despicable claim. “Paul Tibbets never expressed regret over what was done during both atomic missions and was never horrified over what he had seen over Hiroshima. He always stated that both atomic missions were absolutely

necessary and he would have done anything to defeat Japan. Paul Tibbets always recognized the dropping of the atomic bombs was an act of war done to end that war. He told me this in the many long hours of conversation I had with him immediately following the Hiroshima mission, and he held that viewpoint to the day he died.”

Pellegrino reserved the final insult for the end of his book. On the very last page, he quotes from an alleged 1999 letter from Tibbets to Nagasaki strike aircraft Flight Engineer John Kuharek and “cited by J. C. Muller at the 2005 Tinian Symposium.” Pellegrino states that in this letter “Tibbets expressed his belief that after Hiroshima and the massive firebombings elsewhere, Japan was so defeated and so close to surrender that Sweeney's bomb had become redundant if not completely irrelevant, and never needed to be dropped in the first place.” The letter in question quoted at this 2005 Tinian Symposium was in fact actually written in 1995 by Tibbets to historian John Coster-Mullen. This erroneous statement by Tibbets does not appear anywhere in this letter and is another complete fabrication.

Beyond the dishonorable practice of falsely taking credit for combat which one never engaged in is the important issue of besmirching the historical record. Things like this must not be allowed to pass, especially in an event that is one of the most important of the 20th century. There are many, many more errors and distortions in Mr. Pellegrino’s book. Representatives of the 509th Composite Group would be happy to point them out.

It has been reported that the famed director, James Cameron, from such movies as *Avatar*, *Titanic* and *Terminator*, may be interested in making a film about nuclear weapons and the missions over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It has also been reported that he has optioned Charles Pellegrino’s book, *Last Train from Hiroshima* as a technical and/or historical reference. The 509th Composite Group would welcome the opportunity to help Mr. Cameron make a historically accurate film about these important events, but strongly cautions that certain accounts in Pellegrino’s book are complete fiction and cause great damage to the true history, reputations, and honor of the heroes of the 509th Composite Group.