

Bringing an End to War: Paul Tibbets and the Decision to Drop the Atom Bomb

- **Compelling Question**
 - How can Paul Tibbets risking his life and reputation for the United States inspire you to make sacrifices in your life?
- **Virtue:** Self-sacrifice
- **Definition** – Self-sacrifice is purposeful action exchanging personal loss for the good of others.
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will learn about Paul Tibbets and his mission to drop the atomic bomb. Students will explore how the unselfish actions of he and his crew helped to bring the war with Japan to a close. Through his example, they will learn how they can act unselfishly in their own lives.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will analyze Paul Tibbets actions in dropping the atomic bomb.
 - Students will understand how acting selflessly can benefit their community
 - Students will apply their knowledge to act more selflessly in their own lives
- **Background**
 - By 1945, the Second World War had been dragging on for 6 long years. The United States had entered in December of 1941 after the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Since mid-1942, the United States had been executing a slow and bloody campaign against the Japanese Imperial forces. Following a strategy known as “Island Hopping”, American forces moved inexorably closer to the Japanese “Home Islands”. As they went they set up air fields and support bases that helped them expand further and further into the Pacific. The closer the American’s got to shores of Japan, the more fierce and costly the conflicts became. Two of the bloodiest were Iwo Jima and Okinawa, the first of the Japanese “Home Islands”. Both fought in 1945, collectively costing nearly 20,000 lives. Planners feared that the eventual invasion of Japan would be even more costly.

While the American forces advanced slowly across the Pacific, their scientists were busy working on a new secret weapon, the atomic bomb. The United States hoped that this weapon would be so powerful that it would force the Japanese to the negotiating table. The weapon was finally read and tested in early 1945. All that was left was to use this new deadly tool in the war zone. That mission fell to Paul Tibbets.

- **Vocabulary**
 - Strained
 - B-29
 - Embroiled
 - Japanese Home Islands
 - Unpredictable
 - Stark
 - Barnstormer
 - Unfathomable
 - Great Depression
 - Enthusiastically
 - Aeronautical
 - Unprecedented
 - Conflagration
 - Provoke
- **Introduce Text**
 - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
 - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**
 - Who was Paul Tibbets?
 - Why was this mission undertaken? What did Paul Tibbets risk in carrying it out?
 - How did Paul Tibbets unselfish actions help to shape his identity?
- **Discussion Questions**
 - Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
 - Illustrated History of World War II, *Time-Life*, 1999
 - Goldstein, Richard. "Paul W. Tibbets Jr., Pilot of Enola Gay, Dies at 92." *The New York Times*. October 31, 2007. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/01/obituaries/01cnd-tibbets.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0
 - "Pilot of Enola Gay Had No Regrets for Hiroshima." <http://www.wbur.org/npr/15858203/pilot-of-enola-gay-had-no-regrets-for-hiroshima>

Handout A: Bringing an End to War: Paul Tibbets and the Decision to Drop the Atom Bomb

Background

By 1945, the Second World War had been dragging on for six long years. The United States had entered in December of 1941 after the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Since mid-1942, the United States had been executing a slow and bloody campaign against the Japanese Imperial forces. Following a strategy known as “Island Hopping”, American forces moved inexorably closer to the Japanese “Home Islands”. As they moved from island to island, they set up air fields and support bases to help them expand further and further into the Pacific. The closer the Americans got to shores of Japan, the fiercer and more costly the conflicts became. Two of the bloodiest were Iwo Jima and Okinawa, the first of the Japanese “Home Islands”. Both fought in 1945, they collectively cost nearly 20,000 lives. Planners feared that the eventual invasion of Japan would be even more costly.

While the American forces advanced slowly across the Pacific, their scientists were busy working on a new secret weapon, the atomic bomb. The United States hoped that this weapon would be so powerful that it would force the Japanese to the negotiating table. The weapon was finally read and tested in early 1945. All that was left was to use this new deadly tool in the war zone. That mission fell to Paul Tibbets.

Narrative

He understood what he was being asked to accomplish. He also understood that one day the pages of history may question his actions. But on the morning of August 6, 1945, when the Enola Gay strained to get off the ground as a result of the 10,000 pound atom bomb that made the B-29 dangerously close to the airplane's cargo capacity, Colonel Paul Tibbets was not worrying about how history would judge him. One thing in his mind was far more important than his reputation—ending World War II. Over the past six years, the world had been embroiled in war. Millions of soldiers and civilians had lost their lives. Germany had surrendered in May, bringing an end to combat operations in the European Theater. Now only the Empire of Japan stood between the world and peace.

Many believed that invading and taking the Japanese home islands would be the only way to finally knock Japan out of the war. However, in Paul Tibbets' cargo bay there hung a new experimental weapon that had the possibility of making an invasion unnecessary. In his mind, whatever unprecedented horror and damage awaited the people of Hiroshima would be far less than the uncertainty and unpredictability of America launching a military invasion upon Japan. More importantly, whatever some may have said later, Tibbets was willing to risk his reputation at the expense of a quick end to the war.

The open waters of the seas south of Japan were a stark contrast to the corn fields of Iowa where Tibbets grew up. But what was no different was the open air that Tibbets navigated his airplane, the Enola Gay, through as he headed north to Hiroshima.

Flying in an airplane had been Tibbets' first love, something that captivated his heart the moment he jumped in an airplane. His first flying experience was at age twelve when he had joined barnstormer Doug Davis at the Hialeah Race Track in Florida and thrown candy bars down to an excited crowd below. The year was 1927, the same year Babe Ruth would smack an unfathomable sixty home runs for the New York Yankees and the same year "Lucky" Lindbergh would make all of America proud by becoming the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic. It was a restless, exciting decade for America, but one that quickly faded from memory when the Great Depression struck in 1929. The economic horrors of the 1930s were followed with another challenging moment in the country's history when the Japanese brought America into World War II with their attack upon Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

His passion for flying brought Tibbets into the military a few years prior to the attack upon Pearl Harbor. He enlisted enthusiastically in the army in 1937. By 1938, he had become a pilot in the Army Air Corps. When the United States joined World War II in 1941, Tibbets was sent to Europe where he flew 43 bombing missions. His aeronautical skills attracted attention and he eventually found himself back in the states testing a new weapon that American hoped to introduce into the war, a massive new bomber labeled the B-29, nicknamed the “Superfortress”.

While Tibbets was test flying the B-29, other Americans were busy trying to develop another new weapon—the atomic bomb. Code named the Manhattan Project, it was a race against Hitler and the Nazis at first, but when the Allied Forces forced Germany's surrender in May 1945, the atom bomb had yet to be successfully built or tested.

The atom bomb became a reality in July 1945 when a group of American scientists and military personnel gathered in the remote deserts of New Mexico to observe a successful detonation of an atom bomb. Thus, America and its new president, Harry Truman, had a choice to make. Either they could launch a Normandy-like invasion of the well-guarded Japanese mainland, or they could use the atom bomb in hopes that the Japanese would realize there was no defense against its unprecedented destructive forces.

After less than six months on the job, Truman made his choice. The Japanese had rejected a chance to end the war in the Potsdam Ultimatum, and Truman decided to drop the atom bomb on two Japanese cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The military brass decided that the best pilot to be given this responsibility to lead this mission that would be Tibbets.

In the early hours of August 6, 1945, roughly 2,000 miles southeast of Japan, the crew of the Enola Gay (named for Tibbets' mother, who had encouraged him to follow his dream of becoming a pilot) departed from Tinian in the Mariana Islands and headed toward history. At 8:16 a.m., as the crew looked down upon the city of Hiroshima, the Enola Gay dropped its fateful cargo. Forty five seconds later, the weapon, nicknamed "Little Boy", exploded with a force of over 12,000 tons of TNT. Instantly, 70,000 people vanished and the heart of the city instantly became a conflagration. Three days later, after the Japanese refused to surrender despite the attack upon Hiroshima, another atomic bomb was released upon the city of Nagasaki. This time the Japanese relented. Officially, the war ended when the Japanese surrendered aboard the USS Missouri on September 2, 1945, but in reality the war was over when the atom bombs destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The decision to lead the mission that would drop the world's first atomic bomb was never second-guessed or questioned by Tibbets himself. In his mind, he was willing to sacrifice his life or whatever the mission might do to his personal reputation in order to spare the larger loss of human life and misery that he and many other top military advisers believed a conventional attack upon Japan would provoke. In an interview with the *Columbia Dispatch* in 1975, Tibbets stated "I sleep clearly every night...I knew when we got the assignment it was going to be an emotional thing...We knew it was going to kill people left and right. But my one driving interest was to do the best job I could we could to end the killing as quick as possible."

History is filled with stories of individuals willing to sacrifice what may be good for them to the benefit of others. From General Washington's willingness to give up his military command and return to his Mount Vernon farm at the end of the American Revolution, to Abraham Lincoln's decision to carry the burden of full responsibility for whatever hardships a Civil War would reign down upon America. While Tibbets' example of self-sacrifice is mostly ignored, he has every right to be included amongst such heroes. He was willing to leave it up to others to debate the morality of his actions. All he cared about was ending the war.