The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 400
"War in the Air II"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In summer 1943, the Allied bombing attack against Hamburg forced the Germans to revamp their air defenses. The Americans put together their biggest bombing raid so far, while Churchill and Roosevelt met at Quebec to discuss their next moves.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 400. War in the Air II.

Last week, I told you about the RAF bombing campaign over Germany in the first half of 1943, culminating in the devastating raids on Hamburg in late July and early August. Today I want to begin by talking about the aftermath.

The devastation of Hamburg was something of a game-changer for the Allied strategic bombing effort. The news of the city's destruction was received gladly in London and Washington. Allied and neutral nation press reports were estimating the death toll at over 100,000, though the true number was probably around 30-40,000.

As you know from past episodes in which we looked at strategic bombing, the threat of mass air raids on cities was viewed with terror in the Thirties. It was widely believed that such attacks might, in a period of time as short as a few weeks, force capitulation. It might even reduce the enemy nation to a pre-industrial economy.

But in practice, the results of aerial bombing had been far less dramatic than most expected, not to mention far more costly to the attacker in terms of losses of aircraft and aircrews. The first sustained effort to defeat an enemy nation by strategic bombing alone, the Battle of Britain, was an abject failure. Yes, it caused death and destruction and terror in Britain and produced a small drop in the nation's war production, but it did not come near to forcing the British to ask for terms. If anything, it stiffened the nation's resolve to continue the war. Afterward, the RAF's own bombing campaign against Germany steadily escalated, but the British experience was

similar. Losses were high and the results were unimpressive. Even within the British government and the RAF, there were those who advocated giving up on the project.

Now, in one stroke, RAF Bomber Command and its leader, Air Chief Marshal Arthur Harris, had finally demonstrated that the bombing of an enemy city could be every bit as terrible as everyone imagined ten years ago. Guernica, Warsaw, Rotterdam, Coventry—those places had been struck by bombing attacks that shocked the world. Each was more terrible than the last, but all of them were children playing with matches compared to the firestorm that had devoured Hamburg.

In Germany, the raid struck fear into the government. Minister for Armaments Albert Speer told Reichsmarschall Göring, whom Hitler had appointed Germany's chief economic planner, that five or six more such raids on German cities could devastate German arms production. The static Kammhuber Line had proved all but useless, prodding the Luftwaffe into switching to a more flexible defense. Göring had been pushing for more bomber construction, as he had ambitions of resuming the bombing campaign against Britain. Even before the Hamburg bombing, though, he had changed his mind and emphasized fighter production instead. Now it seemed the air war over Germany might prove the decisive battle of the war.

At Göring's direction, the Air Ministry developed plans to increase fighter production to 3,000 every month by reducing bomber production. The Luftwaffe began an expanded research program to close the gap with the Allies' superior radar by studying the equipment the Germans had captured from British bombers that had been shot down.

In the short term, the Germans rushed more fighters and anti-aircraft guns to western Germany and northern France to beef up their bomber defenses. By the end of August, the Luftwaffe had 1,200 fighters stationed in Germany and France dedicated to air defense. This was about half of Germany's total fighter strength. Anti-aircraft gun strength increased by 25%; many of the added guns were the newer and bigger 105mm and 128mm cannons.

By the way, the German word for an anti-aircraft gun was *Flugabwehrkanone,* which literally means "aircraft defense cannon." This was shortened to the contraction *Flak,* F-L-A-K. It wasn't long before the word *flak* entered the English language, though in English it means not the cannon but the anti-aircraft fire itself, which gives you a clear indication of who was shooting the flak and who was getting shot at.

From this also came the term "flak jacket," which was originally protective clothing for bomber crews to shield them from flak fragments flying inside the plane. The flak jacket was first conceived by a doctor in the American Eighth Air Force and developed by the British Wilkinson Sword company. The British gave the Americans thousands of these jackets as Reverse Lend-Lease.

In modern times, we use the word *flak* metaphorically to mean sharp criticism, as in, "her suggestion drew a lot of flak." Please note there is also an English word flack, F-L-A-C-K, an

informal term for a publicist or press agent. They sound the same but are spelled differently. Please don't confuse them. Thank you. This has been a public service announcement from *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Just two weeks after the Hamburg bombings, Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt held another conference, this time in the Canadian city of Québec. I've mentioned this conference briefly twice before. Once again, Joseph Stalin had been invited to attend; once again he declined. This time, the Allied leaders resolved that next time, there would definitely, positively be a meeting of all three heads of the major Allied governments. Franklin Roosevelt suggested Alaska as the meeting place, while Churchill proposed Cairo or some other location in the Middle East. Stalin suggested Teheran, the capital of Iran, and Churchill and Roosevelt agreed.

At Québec, the two allies agreed to begin detailed planning and preparation for Operation Overlord, the long-awaited invasion of continental Europe, with May 1, 1944 as the tentative start date. Winston Churchill got Roosevelt to agree to an alternative plan, Operation Jupiter, should Overlord prove not to be feasible. This was one of Churchill's many less-than-fully-thought-through ideas. Jupiter was a proposed invasion of Norway; Churchill had been pushing the idea since 1941, over the objections of all his top military advisors, who argued that German air power in Norway would make the invasion challenging, and even if it were successful in driving out the German military and securing Norway, this would be of little to no benefit to the Allied war effort. Bombers based in Norway would not have any easier time flying into Germany than they would from Britain.

The news of the fall of Sicily to the Anglo-American invasion force came during the conference, and so there was much talk about the effort to drive Italy out of the war. Roosevelt and Churchill agreed to September 3 as the date for the invasion of the Italian mainland and they reiterated their agreement that they would accept nothing short of unconditional surrender from the Italians. With regard to the Balkans, they agreed that Allied involvement in that region would be limited to arming the resistance groups opposing the German occupation.

The most important agreement made at Québec involved the two allies' atom bomb projects: the British project codenamed Tube Alloys, and the American program, informally referred to as the Manhattan Project. I described to you in episode 391 how General Leslie Groves took over the atom bomb project and kick-started the development of industrial facilities to produce U-235 and Pu-239 in sufficient quantities to power an atomic bomb.

The British were understandably curious about what the Americans were up to, but Groves and his superiors were reluctant to share information with British researchers working on Tube Alloys. The British were ahead of the Americans on the theoretical side; the Americans were suspicious that the British intended to collect information about these American construction projects to gain for themselves an advantage in any post-war development of atomic power for commercial purposes.

Churchill and his government had considered a joint project with Canada to build their own facilities for uranium isotope separation and plutonium production, but it became clear that the costs of such projects, in money, in steel, in electricity, and in the diversion of large numbers of skilled workers, would seriously hinder the British war effort in other areas.

The Cabinet concluded that though Britain still maintained a lead on the theoretical side, the Americans were quickly catching up. Therefore, it made sense to offer to fold Tube Alloys into the Manhattan Project now, when the offer was still worth something to the Americans, rather than wait until some future date, when it would be worth nothing. The British eased American concerns by acknowledging that the United States was bearing the costs of developing atomic industrial facilities on its own, and so Britain would pledge not make use of this American technology for any commercial purpose after the war, except to the degree authorized by the President of the United States.

The British and Americans also pledged that they would never use atomic weapons against each other, that they would not use them against any third country without mutual consent, and neither would either country share any of this information Britain was offering with any third country, again unless there was mutual consent. A Combined Policy Committee, composed of six officials—three Americans, two Britons, and one Canadian—would oversee the joint project.

August 17, 1943 was an important date in the Second World War. Not only was it the first day of the Québec conference and the day Sicily fell to the Allies, it was also when the US Eighth Air Force launched its biggest bombing raid against Germany yet. The date chosen was no accident; it represented the one-year anniversary of the first American bombing raid in Europe.

So far, the majority of American bombing strikes in occupied Europe had been in France or Italy, not Germany. This raid would consist of 376 B-17 bombers and was aimed at two important industrial targets. One group of bombers, commanded by General Robert Williams, would attack ball-bearing factories in Schweinfurt that represented nearly half of the total German production of those crucial ball bearings. The second group, commanded by General Curtis LeMay, targeted a Messerschmitt factory in Regensburg that produced 20% of Germany's workhorse Me-109 fighter planes. It was hoped that attacks on two important targets at the same time would complicate German efforts to defend against them.

Not only would this be the largest American bombing raid of the war so far, it would also represent the deepest American penetration into German airspace. Unfortunately for the Americans, their fighter escorts only had enough range to accompany them as far as Belgium before turning back, while the bombers were still more than an hour from their targets.

German fighters began attacking the bombers as soon as the American fighters turned away. LeMay's force of 146 bombers was attacked all along their route to Regensburg. Anti-aircraft fire from the ground was light, but the fighters were able to shoot down or disable 15 of the

bombers. The remaining bombers reached the target just before noon. Visibility was excellent and they were able to drop 300 tons of bombs on the factory.

LeMay's mission had been conceived as an experiment in shuttle bombing, meaning that rather than turn back toward England after the bombing run, they had orders to proceed south over the Alps and the Mediterranean to airfields in North Africa. The German defenders weren't expecting this, and they had only a few fighters capable of pursuing them. On the way to North Africa, two damaged American bombers were forced to land in Switzerland. Their crews were interned. Six other bombers crashed, one in Italy and five into the Mediterranean. Most of the 122 B-17s that reached Allied bases in North Africa were damaged; only 55 of them ever made the return trip to England.

The other bomber group had it worse. Williams' bombers were supposed to enter German airspace at the same time as LeMay's, in the hope of overwhelming German defenses, but bad weather forced a three-hour delay, which gave the German fighters time to refuel and rearm, so they were fully prepared for the second wave when it finally arrived.

An estimated 300 German fighters attacked Williams' group during this mission. The B-17s were able to reach the ball-bearing factories and drop over 400 tons of bombs on them, although the accuracy of the later bomb drops was impaired by the pall of smoke hanging over the site.

So the bombing attacks were reasonably successful, though American losses were high. Sixty bombers were lost and a further 176 damaged to some degree. The Germans lost 28 fighters.

That night, the RAF followed up the American attacks with a bombing raid on the German military research center at Peenemünde, on the Baltic coast of Germany. Allied intelligence services had received tips from members of the resistance in Poland and Austria that the Germans were using this research center to experiment with rockets. These rockets were said to be potentially capable of reaching Britain.

The night of August 17, the British sent Mosquito fighter-bombers to drop Pathfinder flares over Berlin. This was the procedure the RAF normally used to guide heavy bombers to their targets at night. But this time, it was a diversion to draw off German night fighters. Over 300 Lancaster bombers and another 300 smaller bombers struck Peenemünde, dropping almost 2,000 tons of bombs on the facility.

The German night fighters did soon figure out that the flares over Berlin were a diversion and proceeded to the real target. They shot down 23 British Lancasters and 17 smaller bombers. The Luftwaffe lost 12 planes.

How much did these raids accomplish, and was it enough to justify the costs? In the case of the RAF bombing of Peenemünde, this is a question still debated in our time. Still, even the

conservative estimates of how much damage the raid did to the German rocket program suggest it delayed the first V-2 attacks by two months. I'd call that significant.

The Regensburg raid destroyed six Messerschmitt workshops, which caused a temporary drop in fighter plane production, but keep in mind these were aircraft assembly shops, meaning they were basically just large enclosed spaces in which workers put the planes together. The Germans began dispersing their assembly operations—that is, separate shops in different locations, to make them harder to find and less vulnerable to air attack.

The Schweinfurt raid caused severe damage to two ball bearing plants, and according to Albert Speer, the German minister of armaments, caused a 34% drop in production, but this was only temporary and Germany had sufficient inventories of ball bearings on hand to continue building war machines until the factories were repaired.

Speer also said, after the war, that the Americans had made a mistake by not bombing the Schweinfurt site repeatedly, since a longer delay in restoring production would indeed have had a serious impact on German war production.

The reason the Americans did not return was the heavy losses the Eighth Air Force suffered during this raid. They had to replace the lost planes, and it would not be until October that the Americans tried again, and in fact on October 14, they made another raid on the ball bearing plants at Schweinfurt. American losses on that raid were even worse. This time, the 291 B-17s were escorted by American P-47 fighters as far as Aachen, but once again, as soon as the American fighters turned back, German fighters appeared and began attacking the bombers.

The ball bearing plants were hit again, but were back in operation in six weeks. The Americans lost 77 bombers out of 291, a loss rate of more than 25%. Due to the heavy losses they sustained, the Eighth Air Force began limiting themselves to easier targets closer to Britain; that is, targets in France and German coastal cities like Bremen and Wilhelmshaven. They would not attempt another raid this deep into German airspace until February 1944.

The raids on the Schweinfurt ball bearing plants would become the inspiration for the novel *Twelve O'Clock High*, by Beirne Lay, Jr. and Sy Bartlett, published in 1948. It was adapted into a film with the same title, produced by Darryl F. Zanuck, directed by Henry King, and starring Gregory Peck, released in 1949. The film was nominated for four Academy Awards and won two. A television series based on the movie and also titled *Twelve O'Clock High* ran on the ABC television network from 1964 to 1967.

[music: Debussy, "Le vent dans la plaine."]

One of the hoped-for benefits of the Allied bombing campaign over Germany was damage to the German public's morale. The Nazi leadership all vividly remembered the German Revolution of

1918 that forced an end to the last war and were determined to do whatever it took to make sure nothing like that would happen during *this* war.

It was for this reason that in April 1942, once the RAF began large-scale bombing raids on German cities, Adolf Hitler assigned his propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, to oversee the state response to the air raids. This decision is also evidence of Hitler's increasing frustration with his aviation minister, Hermann Göring, whom he blamed for the Luftwaffe's inability to prevent these bombings.

Goebbels organized German civil defense through the Nazi Party, not through official organizations such as the Luftwaffe or the police. He wanted reports of bombing raids prepared by local Party officials and sent directly to him, and being propaganda minister, he was particularly interested in how the Allied bombings were affecting public morale.

This arrangement meant that Goebbels was usually better informed about Allied bombing raids and the damage they caused than anyone else in the German government or military. And from 1942 until the end of the war, local Nazi Party leaders would find that protecting civilians from the air raids would be their most important job. Party members enforced blackout regulations, appointed air-raid wardens, and maintained order in the air raid shelters. The Party provided SA and SS members when needed, recruited boys in the Hitler Youth as messengers.

As was typical of the government of Nazi Germany, Hitler was vague on the extent of Goebbels' powers, though the fact that the two of them were close and saw each other frequently of itself guaranteed that Goebbels had clout. In early 1943, when Hitler grudgingly agreed to set up an inter-ministerial committee to oversee air raid response, this committee was created within the Propaganda Ministry.

Selbschutztruppen, or "self-protection squads" were to be organized by Party leadership within local communities to respond to bombings. After the Hamburg bombings, Hitler decreed that service in these squads would be mandatory for every adult German, men and women alike, although in practice only a portion of the civilian population served in these squads.

In the aftermath of a bombing raid, those driven from their homes would be taken to emergency centers, where hot meals, beer, and cigarettes were distributed. This was because Goebbels took the view that a quick response and the offer of such comforts did much to ameliorate the shock of the bombing. After immediate needs were addressed, the homeless would be given ration cards and some cash for food and clothing. Houses were evaluated to determine if they could be repaired. If they could, only the minimum was done to make the house habitable: holes in the roof or broken windows would only be boarded up, for example.

Those who could not return to their homes were placed with friends or relatives if possible. If not, families were assigned to empty Jewish homes, or as a last resort, evacuated to the countryside.

Bombing victims were also given vouchers for clothing, furniture, and household goods. These could be redeemed for goods confiscated from Jewish families or looted from countries under German occupation.

Hamburg, like all German cities, was prepared for an air raid, but Operation Gomorrah overwhelmed the relief services. Over 200,000 homes were destroyed in the city, so the German government had no choice but to relax its opposition to evacuations. Within months, 90% of those remaining in the city were living in a regular house, and 50,000 new emergency homes were built in Hamburg within a year.

The most important civil defense lesson the Germans learned from the attacks on Hamburg was that the government slogan, "The air raid shelter is the safest place," was no longer true. Henceforth, shelters had to be equipped with emergency exits. Air raid wardens began explaining to their neighbors when was the right time to evacuate from a shelter. Citizens were advised to wear a coat and hood drenched in water to protect themselves from the flames.

Nine hundred thousand people were evacuated from Hamburg after the bombing, and this shocking news spurred millions more in other German cities to head for the hills. Western German urbanites had little in common with the rural people who were now their neighbors, and there was friction. The city folk looked down on the country folk for greeting one another with *"Heil Hitler,"* a practice people in the cities had abandoned years ago.

The stories the evacuees told frightened the rural people, most of whom had never seen a bombing. Evacuees were also prone to criticize government officials and give their rural hosts a different perspective on the war from what they were getting from government-approved sources.

The Gestapo and the Propaganda Ministry took an interest in this sort of thing, and in the wild rumors that circulated; rumors are the inevitable by-product of relocating large numbers of people. People whispered that certain cities and towns had not been bombed because the British had financial interests in them. Some claimed to be able to predict Allied bombing raids. They came on certain days of the week, or on national holidays, such as Hitler's birthday.

Of greater concern to the Nazis were people who said that the Germans had brought these attacks on themselves by bombing Britain in 1940. Others said it was God's punishment for Germany's mistreatment of the Jews. Some said the end of the world was at hand.

Do you recall episode 384, in which I told you about Goebbels' speech calling for "total war?" That was six months earlier. Some Germans were now blaming these huge bomber attacks on Goebbels and his speech. The Allies might have interpreted it as a call for unrestricted warfare, and were answering in kind.

Soon a little song was making the rounds in western Germany. The lyrics went like this:

Lieber Tommy, fliege weiter
Wir sind alles Bergarbeiter.
Fliege weiter nach Berlin
Die haben alle "ja!" geschrien.

You could translate this as:

Dear Tommy, fly onward
We are all miners.
Fly instead to Berlin
They all cried "yes!"

Or to put it another way: "Don't bomb us; bomb the folks in Berlin. They're the ones that cheered for this 'total war' stuff."

It was German government policy not to reveal numbers of deaths or to describe the damage to the city following an Allied bombing raid. German propaganda instead spoke of powerful secret weapons under development by the Luftwaffe that would soon exact revenge. These secret weapons were the V-1 and V-2 rockets, the letter V standing for *Vergeltung,* a German word that means not so much revenge as something more like retribution or payback.

I'll have more to say about the V-1 and the V-2 in future episodes. For now, let's just say these weapons were first tested in early 1943, and the German leadership was optimistic that large-scale production and deployment was right around the corner. Hermann Göring, for example, visited Hamburg a few days after the Allied bombings to inspect the damage and to assure the victims that the Luftwaffe would soon strike back against the perpetrators.

But by autumn, nothing had changed. The British continued to bomb, and the V weapons had not appeared. A joke began to circulate, claiming that the German government had issued an ultimatum to the British and the Americans: either cease the bombing raids over Germany immediately, or else our leaders will give more revenge speeches. A rumor spread that the Allies had promised to stop the bombing if a new government was put into place.

News of the bombings was also upsetting to the soldiers on the front lines. German censors confiscated letters that described the bombings too vividly, but they couldn't prevent soldiers from going home on leave, where they could see the destruction for themselves. Soldiers began to ask what the point was of fighting on the front lines if their homes were being destroyed behind their backs. These anxieties convinced military officials to end the policy of concealing information about bombings. To the contrary, special "bomb postcards" were issued in the aftermath of air raids that families could use to reassure their loved ones in uniform that they were all right. These special postcards received expedited handling and delivery.

The bombing raids of 1943 engendered fear and anxiety in many German civilians, but they did not engender any serious opposition to the Nazi government. Keep in mind that most of these

bombing raids struck targets in western Germany or along the North Sea coast, and for all the people they killed, injured, or left homeless, the fact remained that most of the population of Germany had not so much as seen an Allied bomber.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening and I'd like to thank Victor and Henry for their kind donations, and thank you to Keith for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Victor, Henry, and Keith help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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I am happy to report that my son continues to do well, but I'm still going to have to take a bye week to finish catching up. So I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take a look at the naval combat in the North Atlantic. For the U-boats, 1943 was the best of times, and it was the worst of times. We'll talk about that in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Much of the work done at the Québec conference was done at the city's famed Château Frontenac hotel. When the meetings were over for the day, it was the job of a team of Canadian soldiers to tidy up the meeting rooms in preparation for the next day's work.

One such soldier was the 25-year-old Sergeant Major Émile Couture. Now, as was typical at a conference like this, the Canadian hosts provided little gifts for the delegates to use during their discussions. Any of these trinkets left behind were to be collected and disposed of, but Sergeant Major Couture figured, quite reasonably, that if they were meant to be thrown in the trash anyway, no one would mind if he kept a few of the items as souvenirs. No doubt other soldiers were doing the same.

Among the keepsakes Couture collected was a letter opener embossed with the name "Franklin D. Roosevelt" and a blotter bearing the name of Winston Churchill, but the coolest one was undoubtedly a leather portfolio inscribed in gold leaf with the words "Churchill-Roosevelt, Québec Conference, 1943."

It was only after he got home that he looked inside and discovered the portfolio was not empty. It was stuffed full of papers detailing the disposition of Allied military assets—how many soldiers,

how many planes, how many tanks—in locations across the world. There were also tactical plans for something called “Operation Overlord.”

That’s when Couture panicked, slapped the portfolio shut, and stuffed it under his mattress. I doubt he got much sleep that night; the next morning, he brought the portfolio back and turned it over to his commanding officer. The officer told him to go home, say nothing, and “We’ll deal with you [later.]”

He was interrogated by Scotland Yard and the FBI, who both concluded he was innocent of any ill motive. Allied authorities would have been within their rights to put Couture behind bars as a security risk anyway, at least until after Operation Overlord began, but they chose instead to trust in his silence.

In 1944, there was a second Québec Conference, and there Sergeant Major Couture was awarded a British Empire Medal, the highest award that could be granted to an NCO for meritorious service outside of combat. To avoid official embarrassment, the citation said only that he was recognized for “services rendered.” Even so, it was a story hard to keep secret and someone leaked it to the press ever before the conference was over. Couture was interviewed by a number of press outlets, including the American news magazines *Time* and *Newsweek*.

Émile Couture died in 1972, at the age of 54. Although he told his story many times, there was one bit of it he took with him to the grave: where he had found the portfolio and who was responsible for leaving it behind. His family later donated the other souvenirs he had collected to the Royal 22e Régiment Museum in Québec, where they are on display as part of the museum’s exhibit on the two Quebec Conferences.

[music: Closing War Theme]