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20th Air Force Association

Maj. Gen Heywood Hansell speaking to 58th Wing Reunion Banquet, 1985

Who Would Send B-29s to the CBI?

I'd like to talk to you tonight, not about operations because you all are familiar with operations...know more about them than I do and I'm sure your memories are far better than mine...but I'd like to talk to you a little about the background for those operations in the Marianas, for they represented the final chapter in the history of American Airpower...the rise to American Airpower. It's a fairly short history. Only lasted about 20 years, and I'd like to talk to you about the salient points in that process.

It all started with Billy Mitchell, right after World War I. He contended that the airplane had brought, not just a new weapon, but a new way of waging war. In the past, armies had fought each other, sometimes for years before they could get at the interior of the enemy country. Mitchell contended that, with the airplane it was possible to overfly those armies and go directly to the real objective, which was the interior of the enemy country. That's where the power lay. That's where the defeat and victory lay. And this, according to Mitchell was a new way to wage war.

The Air Corps Tactical School picked up the idea in the 30's codified it, and developed the Strategic Doctrine. They looked at it this way: There were three general ways in which airpower could be applied in war. One is against the enemy armed forces, particularly air forces, and things that support them directly...supplies and things of that nature. The second was to attack cities in an effort to break the will of the people living there. The third influenced the first two, was to destroy or paralyze the great industrial systems that supported both the enemy armed forces and their people, such things as the electrical power system. No wheel of industry, no machine tool turns anywhere without electric power. If the power system could be paralyzed, it would carry with it the paralysis of the enemy nation. Another system was transportation. Goods have to be transported, manufactured, delivered. If the transportation system can be broken down, once again it paralyzes industry and the economy of the enemy nation. A third is energy, petroleum products primarily, refineries, synthetic plants, gas pipelines. Modern industry depends upon a source of energy, and the Tactical School concluded there are sensitive points in all these systems, which could be targets. If they are destroyed it brings paralysis and, with it, victory through air power.

The War Department took violent exception to this idea by stating that, "Victory in war can come only through victory on the battlefield, that the whole purpose of war is to defeat an enemy army." It went so far as to say that, "The Air Force has no mission except support of the Army," and in 1940 it cancelled all 4-engine bomber requests from the budget. Obviously, the two ideas were on a collision course.

Then, in July 1941, an event took place that marked a turning-point in the whole history of air power. The President became very much concerned about what was going on in Europe. Hitler's armies had swept through Western Europe and then turned upon Russia and was carving out great chunks of Russian territory, actually capturing hundreds of thousands – literally hundreds of

thousands – of Russian prisoners! The President wrote two letters, identical, to the Secretary of War and the Secretary of the Navy. Those letters asked, “What should be the production requirement to achieve superiority and defeat our enemies?” The War Department General Staff undertook to answer for both the Air Corps and the Army, and was preparing statements of air requirements based upon the number of divisions that would be used.

General Arnold had just received permission to establish an Air Staff, which included an Air Plan Division headed by Colonel Harold George, who had been in charge of Strategic Concepts at the Tactical School. Colonel George went to General Arnold and asked that the job of Air Requirements be transferred to his Section, and Gen. Arnold arranged this, but by the time permission was received, there were only seven days left in which to complete the Air Force requirements. This didn't please Harold George.

George accepted the Grand Strategy then agreed upon with the British, the first objective would be to defeat Hitler, that a defense be taken up in the Pacific and, once Hitler's defeat had been accomplished, we would the turn upon Japan. Col. George set up, as his Strategic Objective, an Air Offensive against the interior of Germany, to destroy its war-making capability, and to make surrender without an invasion possible, and if not, to support and invasions. To meet this requirement, he came up with staggering numbers. The primary target in Germany would be electric power, transportation and petroleum industries. To destroy those systems, he called for 11,000 bombers, including 24 groups of B-29s... 11,000 fighters and fighter-bombers, 2,000 reconnaissance aircraft, transports and 1,000 transports and 37,000 trainers, a total of 62,000 airplanes! We actually had on hand 5,000. To man that force and operate it, he called for 2,125,000 people in uniform...at a time when we had about 50,000 men (in uniform).

It was an absolutely staggering proposal and I know of no one but Harold George with the courage to take it to the General Staff. It called for a 1,000 percent increase in aircraft and a 4,000 percent increase in personnel – in three years. The plan was presented to the General Staff with Gen. Marshall present and aroused very vigorous opposition. When questions were raised, Harold George answered very simply by saying, “This is what it takes. If we are not prepared to provide it, we had better stay out of the war.” When the arguments finally subsided, Gen. Marshall spoke at last. He is thus quoted, “I think the plan has merit. I should like for the Secretary to hear it.” Secretary of Stimson approved it and it was approved for production by Harry Hopkins. And that set the program for the entire Army Air Forces for the conduct of the war.

A year later the President again asked for Air Requirements and this time the answer was 127,000 airplanes for 1943 alone, which included the Navy, our Allies and combat attrition. At that time B-29s were switched from the European Theater to the Pacific. B-17s and B-24s were doing pretty well in Europe and B-29s wouldn't be ready for another two years, and their great range would be needed in the Pacific.

Still another year went by, and in August 1943 there was a meeting of the Combined Chiefs of Staff at Quebec, with President Roosevelt and Mr. Churchill. It was then agreed there would be an invasion of Normandy the following year, a new theater- Southeast Asia Command – would be established under Lord Louis Mountbatten, and Gen. Stillwell would command all U.S. Army forces in that theater, including Air Forces, but no mention was made of a Strategic Air Campaign against

Japan. At the meeting's close, Gen. Arnold submitted a plan called "Matterhorn" with which the 58th Wing people are familiar, calling for establishment of bases in India by the British, the building of bases near Chengtu, China by Chiang Kai Shek, the attack on targets in Japan, and the supply by air of the Hump.

The original plan called for 2,000 B-24 type tanker aircraft to support the B-29s, but when submitted to the Joint Logistics Committee, they threw up their hands and hollered, saying, "It is totally unfeasible from the standpoint of logistics." The Joint Plans Committee wanted B-29s sent to MacArthur in the Southwest Pacific...the very thing Gen. Arnold was trying to avoid. Arnold wanted the B-29s used against Japan and knew very well that if the Bomber Command and its B-29s went to MacArthur, he'd never get them back, because they would be used to further his surface campaign and probably would be augmented! And, if MacArthur had B-29s in the Southwest Pacific, Admiral Nimitz would demand them for the Central Pacific, and the whole idea of a strategic air campaign against Japan would never come to pass.

The only place where B-29s could be put and still reach Japan was China, so Gen. Arnold persisted in his plan and opened it up again at the Cairo Conference, three months later, when the President, Mr. Churchill and Chiang Kai Shek were present. Gen. Arnold thought he had a surprising advocate for operating B-29s from China because the President had made a number of personal commitments to Chiang Kai Shek, not one of which had been met. This was highly embarrassing to the President and left him searching for some way to support China. Especially because of the fear China might fold. The President seized upon Matterhorn as something that might satisfy his need. Chiang agreed to build bases in China and Churchill agreed to have bases built near Calcutta, so the program was on its way in spite of the bitter protest from the Joint Logistics Committee.

Two other things affecting B-29s happened at the Cairo Conference. First, I came back from England just before the Cairo Conference and became Joint Air Planner for the Air Plans Committee. To my horror, I found the Far East Joint War Plans Committee had set up a Plan for the Conquest of Japan, whose opening paragraph said, "It has been clearly shown in Europe that airpower is not decisive, therefore all plans for the conquest of Japan must be based upon an invasion of the home islands and victorious battles on the plains of Tokyo" With great difficulty we got this idea changed and, when the Council woke up, the Plan contained a Strategic Air Offensive Against Japan 'to destroy the interior structure of Japan and its capability and willingness to continue the war.' This was, again, a bid for Victory through Airpower and directed Admiral Nimitz to capture the Marianas Islands as bases for B-29s.

So far, so good, but the problem of command was again starting to stare us in the face. Sixteen Wings of B-29s contemplated for the war against Japan. Two would be in China, some in the Marianas...when we took them; some in Northern Luzon after the Philippines were captured; some in the Aleutians. All separate theaters! The problem of conducting an Air War over Japan from such scattered bases with separate commands in each was staggering! Surface commanders were devoted to Unity of Command, but approach it differently. The Army assigned every force with a territorial area to a single theater commander, but not the Navy, which retained operational command of all warships wherever located in a chain of operational command going all the way back to the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington.

We went to Admiral King, presented our problem to him, and suggested that B-29s, really, should have a similar chain-of-command – a single operating command - reporting directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with Theater Commanders charged with support of these forces, building bases and providing base defense, but without operational control. Admiral King thought about it for a few minutes and said, “I could find such a solution acceptable.” And that was another turning point in the history of airpower, because it made possible the setting up of 20th Air Force with Gen. Arnold at its head, commanding B-29s wherever they were, regardless of theater commanders responsible for building and defending their bases, providing them bulk supplies, etc. It was a pretty good solution and, I think, worked quite well.

I would like to digress for a moment . I said I wasn't going to talk about operations, but I'd like to compare the operations in the European Theater with those in the Pacific. I had a B-17 outfit in England, and, if I may diverge for a moment, my headquarters was only 17 miles from Cambridge, a great British University, and where I had an opportunity to do a little research. I found something that surprised me, and I suspect will surprise you. You know, most people think George Washington was born in Virginia. This isn't so. George Washington was born in Texas! And, his father didn't have a Plantation. He owned a big ranch. And he came out of the Ranch House one day and said, “Who cut down my favorite mesquite tree?” And little George replied, “Father, I cannot tell a lie...I cut it down with my machete.” His father said, “What's that you said, son?” And George replied, “Father, I cannot tell a lie...I cut down your mesquite tree with my machete.” His father said, “Well son, if you can't tell a lie, there's no future for you here in Texas, so we're going to send you to Virginia.”

To return to more mundane features of the war, there were four major obstacles to Air Operations in both theaters.

First was Command. We didn't handle that well in Europe. 40% of the Heavy Bombers were sent to Eisenhower in the Mediterranean, where they were used to support land operations. They were out of range of the targets in Germany. Even after Eisenhower moved up to England for the invasion, he succeeded in having all heavy bombers, including British Bomber Command, assigned to him directly, and for six months they operated in support of surface operations, to the neglect of the interior of Germany. Gen Arnold was determined to avoid that, if at all possible, in the Pacific, and 20th Air Force handled that for us all right.

Second was Fighter Opposition. Germany's was extremely tough. The Germans were well-equipped, well trained, well organized, very courageous and very skillful. We took very heavy losses. For a while it looked as though we might not make it...until escort fighters came along and saved the day for us. It was common knowledge that the one thing you must not do is to launch a bomber-invasion without escort fighters! And, in the Pacific, there wasn't a prayer of having escort fighters, because nothing could compare with the range of the B-29s, and it had to operate without fighter escort, regardless of what we had learned. But the B-29 was a better fighting machine than the B-17. It had performance at high altitude, excellent fire control and lots of it, and was able to get pretty tough on occasion.

Third, was Bombing Accuracy. In the 8th Air Force the bombing was ‘not good’, but adequate., It was possible to destroy a selected target by bombing in formation, but in the Pacific we ran into extremely high winds at high altitude and bombing accuracy suffered very materially. In fact,

it was almost impossible to hit anything at high altitudes, and we had to start coming down in altitude in spite of the fact that this favored the Japanese fighters.

Fourth, was Weather, the most conclusive of all. Weather in Europe was bad, particularly in winter, but Germany is a big country and, generally, 5 or 6 times a month you could find a spot where it looked like you could see your target well enough to find targets in a fairly large area. Not so in Japan! This was simply not so. Weather was always bad...bad...bad...bad. Very seldom was there a clear day on which you could hit a selected target, and the APQ-13 Radar was not good enough to permit bombing in the interior of the country. For two months, I tried taking out selected targets I had been assigned, then Gen. LeMay made one of the critical decisions of the war, one of the fine decisions! He decided to turn the attack against Japan cities, which were extremely vulnerable, to make that the main effort and continue the precision bombing only when it looked like the weather was going to break.

His was one of the finest tactical decisions of the war, a very dangerous decision to come in at low altitude. No one knew how good the defenses of Japanese cities might be at night. There was speculation, but no experience, and it took an awful lot of guts to send the entire command in at 5-10,000 feet. Everyone thought they would be sitting ducks! His decision was correct in both respects, and I'm sure you're familiar with the results: 66 cities either completely burned out or nearly burned out. A very decisive effect! And that, coupled with the magnificent aerial mining campaign, particularly in the Inland Sea, turned the trick.

When Mr. Truman became President at Roosevelt's death, he called for an appraisal of the Strategy Against Japan. The Joint Chiefs of Staff queried MacArthur and Nimitz. MacArthur replied with a very strong statement, saying, "It is utterly impossible to defeat Japan by airpower and sea blockade. The only way to defeat Japan is by invasion of the home islands, culminating in victorious battles on Honshu and Kyushu." Admiral Nimitz tended to agree, although he said that sea-blockade and air bombardment might bring about Japan's defeat, but admitted that, "It might take a long time." General Marshall and Admiral King went along with MacArthur. Gen Arnold was visiting LeMay's headquarters in the Marianas Islands, but had become somewhat skeptical. Then he saw the photographs in LeMay's headquarters and heard LeMay's summary of operational reports, and realized Japan was on the verge of defeat and felt Japan could be whipped without an invasion, by airpower.

Gen. Arnold hurried LeMay back to Washington to brief the Joint Chiefs and, if possible, the President. But President Truman had made the decision to invade Kyushu by the 1st of November before LeMay reached Washington. Then the Atomic Bombs were dropped and ended the whole argument.

There was speculation, and I think there always will be, about the China venture. I think there are two answers:

1st, from an operational view, it was 'not a success.' Unfortunately, the Joint Logistics Committee was correct...you just couldn't supply B-29s over the Hump well enough to conduct a successful bombing campaign.

2nd, from the standpoint of strategic effect, I think it was a tremendous success! If we had not attempted Matterhorn, XXth Bomber Command would have wound up in the Southwest Pacific under MacArthur, and the XXIst Bomber Command would surely have wound up under Nimitz, the Air Assault on Japan would have never happened, and surely there would have been an invasion...with enormous loss.

I said, to start with, that you people were in on the final chapter of the vindication of American concepts of air warfare. I repeat that. I think you have a great deal to be proud of and I should like to express my own pride in being here with you and telling you so.