

Half a Mile From Hell

RUSSELL OWEN

AN EYEWITNESS account of the bombing and machine-gunning of a Virginia island . . . the art of aerial bombardment . . . a Life in the United States article

GRAY sky overhead, a filmy pattern of clouds through which slip long, dark wings, sinister wings. They disappear behind a curtain of mist, are half-revealed, then come out again into the sunlight where their bodies gleam like silver. Bombing planes, loaded with tons of TNT, about to drop it on the target a little less than a mile away.

You shrink a little, instinctively, although you know you are perfectly safe. At 12,000 feet these huge ships seem almost directly overhead. It is a bombing demonstration at Plum Tree Island, near Langley Field, Virginia, the headquarters of the group of the most efficient large bombers in the world, known as the "Flying Fortresses." Their name is apt, for they can fight in the air, with their five machine guns, as well as spread death and destruction on the ground. And army fliers do not enjoy the word "bomber"—it has too evil a connotation. They bless the man who coined the name "Flying Fortress," and on the instrument board of each big ship is a metal plaque bearing the two words.

They are due at exactly eleven o'clock, and army fliers pride themselves on their timing. So it is a few seconds before eleven when the first huge plane comes into sight. There is a muffled hum of the motors, barely distinguishable from the ground, although each of those four engines develops 1000 horsepower. High as they are, they appear ponderous, coming on ominously.

On the shore of the little inlet separating the target from the watching crowd are a group of army officers, a general in command; expert fliers, their wives and children; fishermen and villagers; and a group of West Point cadets, down to see what they may some day have to face. They gaze up at the first big machine, shading their eyes against the sun, trying to see when the first bomb, which weighs a ton, is released.

The target is outlined by white uprights, clearly visible. It is 600 feet long and 90 feet wide—far be it from anyone to say that these are the dimensions of a battleship. That is a sore point between the Army and Navy, which is not discussed in public, because the Navy insists battleships cannot be sunk. But the size is significant. Up there in the air, an officer at the bomb sight, that mysterious instrument which makes corrections for altitude, speed, and wind drift, is turning it slowly, impersonally, getting the target in line. And when he sees it directly in aim, somewhat ahead of him, he presses a button that releases 2000 pounds of hell.

Down plunges the long shell. One cannot see it come, but suddenly out there on the marshy island where the target is there is a tiny eruption of earth. There are delayed fuses on these big bombs, for unless they buried themselves deep in the earth before exploding, the spectators would be dodging fragments, even a mile away. Then there is a flash, the earth shakes under our feet, and into



DRAWING BY ALBERT DORNE

the air shoots a geyser of tons of mud 150 feet high, a great mushroom of explosion, with pluming black smoke. Our ears feel the detonation. Another second, and the second big bomb comes down. Another flash of flame, a roar, a concussion, and the whole little island out there seems to shake. It jars something inside of you.

But the target still stands. "It is hard to knock down these flimsy targets," an army officer explains to the cadets. "They yield, but don't break."

Wait a moment. Out of the south, through the clouds which half-conceal it, comes another bomber. (There are eight men in each of these ships.) In the center of the fuselage, under the wing, is a bomb bag which holds the round angels of death. Their fuses have been fitted since they went into the air. They lie in racks, eight bombs, 600 pounds of explosive in each. The man who controls them is far away, in the nose of the plane. He just pushes a button.

Suddenly, out there at the target, the earth becomes a volcano. In split seconds parts of that field lift into the air in black smoke, slashed with flame. The ground rocks, and from one end of the target to the other there is an enveloping cloud. The bomber goes smoothly on, but as its wings disappear in the clouds, and the smoke drifts away, you can see that there is little of the outline of the target left. It has been split down the middle, bracketed at each end, almost completely demolished.

The West Point boys—for they are only boys—have been watching with fascinated



eyes. They are wearing dungarees, saving their white suits for the girls. Their expressions are serious. It is not easy to believe that anything could live in that area where those bombs dropped. Perhaps a very deep dugout would save a few men, but the complete devastation wrought by the bombs is apparent even to the casual observer who never expects to sit under them. You think of China and Spain, and of the war correspondents who have faced bombing in undeclared wars, and mentally take your hat off to the men who have done it. There is something nerve-shattering about the way in which those giant wings come silently over and let loose forces of demolition which are too devastating to imagine. One gets a new point of view about war. What would such bombs do in New York, in London, Paris, or Berlin? It is not a pleasant thought, for, if there is another general war, what has happened so far will be child's play.

Many years ago there was an Italian general who envisaged a mass attack of airplanes, by waves, on the lines of communication, railroads, factories, and large cities, that would completely paralyze resistance and break civilian morale. There are many air officers who still think his theory of wave attack by bombers that would fight their way through resistance is right. And if it is, what is taking place on that little island is a mere gesture.

Again out of the south comes another bomber, with smaller bombs having contact fuses, which explode when they strike the surface. The larger bombs were muffled, because they went deep into the ground before they exploded. But these contact bombs turn the marsh island into a miniature Hades. Their detonations are sharp and ear-shaking; they wipe out what has not been ruined by the big bombs which dug craters hundreds of feet wide. One after another the dark wings come over and demolish the target with their astonishing accuracy. One begins to believe in that Italian general's theory.

The bombers disappear, but there is more to come. When the Army puts on a show of this kind it does a complete job. Away off in the west a lot of little attack planes have been maneuvering in formation. There is a target like a billboard on the edge of the island, and behind it a bunch of uprights which might indicate an enemy encampment or trenches. Down out of the sky in a swift dive come the attack planes, their machine guns wide open. The crack of the explosions seems to be in your ears, right over you, probably because of the air-splitting effect of the bullets.

Jets of water leap up in front of the billboard targets, and even from a distance it is easy to see that they are being torn to ribbons. After each group has let loose its hurricane of death, it goes up in a climbing curve to sweep off to the right, so as to get out of range of those behind. Their graceful curving wings make patterns against the sky. There is no more beautiful thing than a fast airplane in a climb, tilted so that the sun shines against it, its propeller a blur in the light.

They reform and come back again in a group of eighteen, three lines of six each, those behind a little higher

than the others, all aiming at the same target. As they dive down at more than 200 miles an hour, you cannot help thinking of those men in the cockpit, deft hands on the stick, trigger control, and throttle of the engine. A slight miscalculation, an error in judgment, and planes would crash together, or bullets from one behind would tear into the fuselage of one in front. It takes cold nerve and training for such action, but it is all a part of Army routine. They take it and joke about it later over a highball. Not that these fliers belong to the happy-go-lucky school which emerged from the War; tactics are too complicated for that now, the requirements are too strict. There is no more earnest group of men in the country than in the Army and Navy air forces.

After the attack planes come the pursuit ships. They appear suddenly over a group of fishermen's shacks, but before they are seen their guns are heard, like a flock of giant firecrackers. Their noise does not seem so great, but they rip the water to shreds, shoot up tiny geysers, and demolish the targets. Out behind the targets the marsh grass begins to smoke as it catches fire from incendiary bullets. One can imagine men ducking for shelter there, trying to escape from this murderous hail of lead. There wouldn't be much chance.

They fly low, these planes, only about fifty feet above the ground, and the spectators involuntarily duck as they go over. There is something so menacing in that rattle of machine-gun fire that you cannot help believe that it is being aimed at you. The marsh is flaming, smoke is drifting up from it. Out of the sky comes a group of airplanes spitting bullets, and as they reach their target there streams from them a vicious screen of gas. It would be poison gas in war, probably; here it is only a screen to hide an enemy attack.

But it is effective. Fire from the burning grass shoots up—"I hope they burn it all up," says a fisherman—and the red flames lick up through the descending smoke from the planes. For a moment out there on the island is a vision of what war will be. It is terrifying. If anything could have lived in that area, despite dugouts, it would be miraculous. The smoke rises, flames lick along the grass and through the targets—red banners of war—and then the smoke screen comes down and shuts it out. Somehow one feels a little thankful that it can no longer be seen.

Back at the field you meet some of these pilots who have been dripping hell out of the sky, or diving in groups. They are decent chaps, gay, and at the same time with a strange, underlying calm. Flying the way they do breeds a fatalistic attitude that shows in their social contacts. They are kidding the West Point boys, playing games, and talking shop. Shop always comes up. Air war is a vocation, a business. It is a long way from Cannae, where Romans and Carthaginians fought hand to hand, and the best man won, to the day of this civilization where 2000 pounds of explosive is dropped from 12,000 feet at a target where the individual cannot be seen. Perhaps it is the impersonality of bombing which makes it so frightful. An old centurion would probably despise it.

Electing a Republican President

TED PATRICK

BASIC PLAN for the 1940 campaign . . . prepared with sample advertisements and posters for the Republican National Committee by the John H. Doe Advertising Agency

It has been said that a sufficient amount of advertising money, in sufficiently skillful advertising hands, could popularize cancer. Undoubtedly, expert advertising could help sell the American public a Republican president. But there is certain groundwork to be done before advertising itself can perform its miracles.

In this report, therefore, we have attempted to point out what steps, in our opinion, the Republican National Committee must take before it can hope successfully to sell its 1940 model to the American consumer.

In preparing this report containing our plan for your advertising and public-relations strategy for 1940, we have proceeded just as we would if we were preparing a plan for a product such as a soap or a breakfast food.

We have studied your potential customers (who in this case are the voters of America); your objectives; your competition; the desirability of changing the name of your party; the product (or candidate) your potential customers might be most inclined to buy; the packaging; the sales strategy to be followed in presenting that candidate; and the advertising strategy. We have conducted a considerable amount of research here in the office and out in the field; and it is upon this research that our recommendations are based.

Potential Customers

Your potential customers are the 40,000,000 voters of the United States. You need a majority of these to keep out of the red, for in your business, unfortunately, anything less than a majority constitutes No Sale. In 1936, you failed by quite a margin to sell your product (or candidate) to a majority. Yet it must be borne in mind that you did manage to sell 16,500,000 people with a doubtful product and against extremely strong competition.

To win a majority of the electoral votes, it is necessary to add to your 1936 accomplish-

ment only about 3,000,000 new customers. This does not seem an impossible task.

Objectives

In our opinion, therefore, you should set as your objective in 1940, *Winning the Election*. This seems obvious.

But the fact remains that in 1936 most influential members of your company did not have that objective. They were realistic enough to consider it hopeless. Their objective was to make as good a showing as possible and lay the groundwork for 1940. As election time drew closer, many were fired with a false optimism which caused them to lose sight of this future objective, and the resulting confusion did not help matters.

Competition

You cannot afford to underestimate the strength of your competition and the organization they have built up. It is not yet known, of course, exactly what their 1940 model will be like—but whatever it is, it will not be easy to compete with.

Many members of your company feel it would be smart strategy to encourage in every way the renomination of the current model, President Roosevelt. It is the theory of these members that Roosevelt would offer the easiest competition in that the third-term tradition would rise up overwhelmingly to defeat him. We consider this a dangerous strategy to embrace. The third-term taboo has never been examined very closely by the public. The people have a vague idea that it was laid down by Washington,

who is more god than mortal to them, and whose words have come to resemble commandments. Study will show, however, that Washington, at the time he refused a third term, was a tired old man, whose teeth hurt him terribly, and who wanted more than anything else in the world to get back to the peaceful country home he loved so deeply, and

