

A DREAM, A TEMPTATION, AND

THE LONGEST NIGHT OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

THE BOMBER MAFIA



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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

Author's Note

As a little boy, lying in his bed, my father would hear the planes overhead. On their way in. Then, in the small hours of the morning, heading back to Germany. This was in England, in Kent, a few miles south and east of London. My father was born in 1934, which meant he was five when the Second World War broke out. Kent was called Bomb Alley by the British, because it was the English county that German warplanes would fly over on their way to London.

It was not uncommon, in those years, that if a bomber missed its target or had bombs left over, it would simply drop them anywhere on the return trip. One day, a stray bomb landed in my grandparents' back garden. It didn't explode. It just sat there, half buried in the ground—and I think it fair to say that if you were a five-year-old boy with an interest in things mechanical, a German bomb sitting unexploded in your backyard would have been just about the most extraordinary experience imaginable.

Not that my father described it that way. My dad was a mathematician. And an Englishman, which is to say that the language of emotion was not his *first* language. Rather, it was like Latin, or French—something one could study and understand but never fully master. No, that an unexploded German bomb in your backyard would be the most extraordinary experience imaginable for a five-year-old was *my* interpretation when my father told me the story of the bomb, when *I* was five years old.

That was in the late 1960s. We were living in England then, in Southampton. Reminders of what the country had gone through were still everywhere. If you went to London, you could still tell where the bombs had landed—wherever a hideous brutalist building had sprouted up on some centuries-old block.

BBC Radio was always on in our house, and in those days, it seemed like

every second interview was with an old general or paratrooper or prisoner of war. The first short story I wrote as a kid was about the idea that Hitler was actually still alive and coming for England again. I sent it to my grandmother, the one in Kent who'd had the unexploded bomb in her back garden. When my mother heard about my story, she admonished me: someone who had lived through the war might not enjoy a plotline about Hitler's return.

My father once took me and my brothers to a beach overlooking the English Channel. We crawled together through the remnants of an old World War II fortification. I still remember the thrill of wondering whether we would come across some old bullets, or a shell casing, or even the skeleton of some long-lost German spy who'd washed up on shore.

I don't think we lose our childhood fascinations. I know I didn't. I always joke that if there's a novel with the word *spy* in it, I've read it. One day a few years back, I was looking at my bookshelves and realized—to my surprise—just how many nonfiction books about war I had accumulated. The big history bestsellers, but also the specialty histories. Out-of-print memoirs. Academic texts. And what aspect of war were most of those books about? Bombing. *Air Power*, by Stephen Budiansky. *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare*, by Tami Davis Biddle. *Decision over Schweinfurt*, by Thomas M. Coffey. Whole shelves of these histories.ⁱ

Usually when I start accumulating books like that it's because I want to write something about the subject. I have shelves of books on social psychology because I've made my living writing about social psychology. But I never really wrote much about war—especially not the Second World War or, more specifically, airpower. Just bits and pieces here and there.ⁱⁱ Why? I don't know. I imagine that a Freudian would have fun with that question. But maybe the simpler answer is that the more a subject *matters* to you, the harder it is to find a story you want to tell about it. The bar is higher. Which brings us to *The Bomber Mafia*, the book you are reading now. I'm happy to say that with *The Bomber Mafia* I've found a story worthy of my obsession.

One last thing—about the use of that last word, *obsession*. This book was written in service to my obsessions. But it is also a story about other people's obsessions, about one of the grandest obsessions of the twentieth century. I realize, when I look at the things I've written about or explored over the

years, that I'm drawn again and again to obsessives. I like them. I like the idea that someone could push away all the concerns and details that make up everyday life and just zero in on one thing—the thing that fits the contours of his or her imagination. Obsessives lead us astray sometimes. Can't see the bigger picture. Serve not just the world's but also their own narrow interests. But I don't think we get progress or innovation or joy or beauty without obsessives.

When I was reporting this book, I had dinner with the then chief of staff of the US Air Force, David Goldfein. It was at the Air House, on the grounds of Joint Base Myer–Henderson Hall, in northern Virginia, just across the Potomac River from Washington, DC—a grand Victorian on a street of grand Victorians where many of the country's top military brass live. After dinner, General Goldfein invited a group of his friends and colleagues—other senior Air Force officials—to join us. We sat in the general's backyard, five of us in total. They were almost all former military pilots. Many of their fathers had been military pilots. They were the modern-day equivalents of the people you are going to read about in this book. As the evening wore on, I began to notice something.

Air House is just down the road from Reagan National Airport. And every ten minutes or so, a plane would take off over our heads. Nothing fancy: standard commercial passenger planes, flying to Chicago or Tampa or Charlotte. And every time one of those planes flew overhead, the general and his comrades would all glance upward, just to take a look. They couldn't help themselves. Obsessives. My kind of people.

ⁱ I could go on. If, for example, you haven't read Roberta Wohlstetter's *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, then you're missing a real treat.

ⁱⁱ Airpower has been something I've explored in a number of episodes of my podcast, *Revisionist History*, including "Saigon 1965," "The Prime Minister and the Prof," and the eponymous series starting with "The Bomber Mafia" in season 5.

INTRODUCTION

*“This isn’t working.
You’re out.”*

1.

There was a time when the world’s largest airport sat in the middle of the western Pacific, around 1,500 miles from the coast of Japan, on one of a cluster of small tropical islands known as the Marianas. Guam. Saipan. Tinian. The Marianas are the southern end of a largely submerged mountain range—the tips of volcanoes poking up through the deep ocean waters. For most of their history, the Marianas were too small to be of much interest or use to anyone in the wider world. Until the age of airpower, when all of a sudden they took on enormous importance.

The Marianas were in Japanese hands for most of the Second World War. But after a brutal campaign, they fell to the US military in the summer of 1944. Saipan was first, in July. Then Tinian and Guam, in August. When the Marines landed, the Seabees—the Navy’s construction battalion—landed with them and set to work.

In just three months, an entire air base—Isely Field—was fully operational on Saipan. Then, on the island of Tinian, the largest airport in the world,

North Field—8,500-foot runways, four of them. And following that, on Guam, what is now Andersen Air Force Base, the US Air Force's gateway to the Far East. Then came the planes.

Ronald Reagan narrated war films at the time, and one of those was devoted to the earliest missions of the B-29, known as the Superfortress. Reagan described the plane as one of the wonders of the world, a massive airship:

With 2,200 horsepower in each of four engines. With a fuel capacity equal to that of a railroad tank car. A tail that climbed two stories into the air. A body longer than a Corvette. Designed to carry more destruction and carry it higher, faster, farther than any bomber ever built before. And to complete this mission, that's exactly what she was going to have to do.

The B-29 could fly faster and higher than any other bomber in the world and, more crucially, farther than any other bomber. And that extended range—combined with the capture of the Marianas—meant that for the first time since the war in the Pacific began, US Army Air Forces were within striking distance of Japan. A special unit was created to handle the fleet of bombers now parked in the Marianas: the Twenty-First Bomber Command, under the leadership of a brilliant young general named Haywood Hansell.

Throughout the fall and winter of 1944, Hansell launched attack after attack. Hundreds of B-29s skimmed over the Pacific waters, dropped their payloads on Japan, then turned back for the Marianas. As Hansell's airmen prepared to launch themselves at Tokyo, reporters and camera crews flew in from the mainland, recording the excitement for the folks back home.

Ronald Reagan again:

B-29s on Saipan were like artillery pointed at the heart of Japan...The Japs might just as well have tried to stop Niagara Falls. The Twenty-First Bomber Command was ready to hit its first target.

But then, on January 6, 1945, Hansell's commanding officer, General Lauris Norstad, arrived in the Marianas. Things were still pretty primitive on Guam: headquarters were just a bunch of metal Quonset huts on a bluff

overlooking the ocean. Both men would have been exhausted, not just from the privations of the moment but also from the weight of their responsibilities.

I once read a passage by the Royal Air Force general Arthur Harris about what it meant to be an air commander in the Second World War:

I wonder if the frightful mental strain of commanding a large air force in war can ever be realized except by the very few who have experienced it. While a naval commander may at the most be required to conduct a major action once or twice in the whole course of the war, and an army commander is engaged in one battle say once in six months or, in exceptional circumstances, as often as once a month, the commander of a bomber force has to commit the whole of it every twenty-four hours...It is best to leave to the imagination what such a daily strain amounts to when continued over a period of years.

So there were Hansell and Norstad in Guam. Two war-weary airmen, facing what they hoped might be the war's final chapter. Hansell suggested a quick tour: Stand on the beach. Admire the brand-new runways, cut from the jungle. Chat about tactics, plans. Norstad said no. He had something more personal to discuss. And in a moment that would stay with Haywood Hansell for the rest of his life, Norstad turned to him: *This isn't working. You're out.*

"I thought the earth had fallen in—I was completely crushed." That's how, years later, Hansell described his feelings in that moment. Then Norstad delivered the second, deeper blow. He said, *I'm replacing you with Curtis LeMay.*

General Curtis Emerson LeMay, thirty-eight years of age, hero of the bombing campaigns over Germany. One of the most storied airmen of his generation. Hansell knew him well. They had served together in Europe. And Hansell understood immediately that this was not a standard leadership reshuffle. This was a rebuke, an about-face. An admission by Washington that everything Hansell had been doing was now considered wrong. Because Curtis LeMay was Haywood Hansell's antithesis.

Norstad offered that Hansell could stay on if he wished, to be LeMay's deputy, a notion Hansell considered so insulting that he could barely speak.