

The Bombing of Germany

Program Transcript

Narrator: On September 1, 1939, the first day of the war in Europe, President Franklin Roosevelt issued an urgent appeal. He called on all combatants to “under no circumstances undertake the bombardment from the air of civilian populations.” By the time Hitler was finally defeated six years later, Allied bombs had killed thousands of civilians. And both enemy cities and America’s lofty ideals were in ruins.

The United States Eighth Air Force arrived in England with confidence high. The Americans believed that airpower had revolutionized modern warfare. And that their new heavy bomber fleet, flown by well-trained American pilots and crews, would prove decisive against the thus-far unstoppable Nazis. On August 17th, 1942, in their first action of the war, a small fleet of American bombers set out to bomb a railroad yard 200 miles away in occupied France. It would be the first combat test of the American bombing strategy precisely targeting military and industrial objectives and avoiding civilian populations.

The specially designed bombers – B-17 Flying Fortresses – bristled with machine guns, fending off German fighters along the way. The Americans flew in daylight – despite the risks – to enable the bombardiers, with state-of-the-art bombsights, to aim with unprecedented precision. The rail yard was severely damaged. All of the B-17s returned safely. The Americans deemed their first mission an unqualified success.

General Spaatz (archival): Today is the first time American heavy bombers have been in action in this theatre. Manned by American crews and American squadrons.

Narrator: General Carl Spaatz, a flyer since WWI, was commander of all American Air Forces in Britain. Between the wars he had helped develop the theory of precision bombing.

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General Spaatz (archival): General Eaker commanding the bomber command led this flight.

Narrator: General Ira Eaker was charged with putting the theory into practice, convinced that his bombing campaign would bring a belligerent Germany to its knees.

Tami Davis Biddle, Historian: The Americans had developed a theory in the 1930s that was all about finding specific cogs, specific nodes in the enemy war economy, and taking those out, eliminating those, and thereby dismantling the entire enemy war economy.

Conrad Crane, Historian: Precision bombing doctrine was fervently believed by most leaders and most airmen. They really thought what they were doing was the best way to go about fighting a war.

Narrator: After the first mission, American reporters attending General Eaker's briefing trumpeted a great success. But their British allies did not think much of the American bombers or the American strategy.

Tami Davis Biddle, Historian: The British are looking at this with a rather jaded eye, because they're thinking: First of all, this is a tiny effort. Second of all, you're doing things that we tried and couldn't do. You're going to make a lot of the same mistakes we made.

Narrator: Like Roosevelt, England's Prime Minister Winston Churchill had once regarded civilian targets off limits and advocated precision bombing.

Sir Max Hastings, Historian: Churchill was on record repeatedly between the wars as saying that he believed that the air force which concentrated strictly on attacking military objectives and did not attack civilians would be the side that not only deserved to prevail but would prevail when war came.

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Narrator: On the very first day of war, the Germans bombed civilians in Warsaw and later in Rotterdam. Then, in 1940, they hit England.

Tami Davis Biddle, Historian: When some German bombers fly off course at night in late August 1940 and attack a portion of London, Churchill takes this as an opportunity to respond in kind against Berlin. Hitler is so upset by that that he then responds by attacking London. It moves the war into a new phase. It moves the war into bombing of cities, attacks on cities, attacks on civilians.

Jorg Friedrich, Historian: The strategic intention of the attack on London was to destroy military installations and their harbor but if you read the commentaries which Joseph Goebbels wrote into his diary. He didn't write "Shit! The bombs went astray into the civilians!" No! No. He's rejoicing. Hitler says, "Take the harbors" – then the bomb takes the city and Goebbels says, "Fine. We make a hell out of it!" So the bomb teaches the bomber what to do.

Narrator: Commander Arthur Harris, who took over as head of the Royal Air Force's Bomber Command in 1942, had learned the bomb's lessons well. He had studied the Nazi attacks on England, meticulously analyzing the damage inflicted by explosive bombs and incendiaries. The deadly work, he concluded, could be done better still.

Sir Arthur Harris (archival): The Nazis entered this war under the rather childish delusion that they were going to bomb everybody else and nobody was going to bomb them. At Rotterdam, London, Warsaw and half a hundred other places, they put that rather naïve theory into operation. They sowed the wind and now they are going to reap the whirlwind.

Narrator: The RAF had initially tried bombing German military targets by day, until unsustainable losses and poor results compelled them to change. The way to inflict maximum

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harm on the enemy, Harris now insisted, was to bomb hard-to-miss German cities, under cover of darkness. The Americans emphatically disagreed.

Conrad Crane, Historian: There was a fervent sense among most Air Force leaders that this was not the way to go. Bombing cities was inefficient. It was the wrong use of your air assets. We felt we had better weapons than the Brits. We felt our B-17, the B-24, they were better bombers than the British had; we had better bombsights; we had better training. We could do this. Even though they couldn't, we could.

Narrator: Allied leaders, meeting in January 1943 to plan the war's next phase, opted to combine the American and British strategies. Harris and Eaker were ordered to coordinate a 'round-the-clock bomber offensive. To undermine "...the morale of the German people to a point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened." The British would focus on bombing cities at night. The Americans would do their best to achieve "...the progressive destruction of the German military, industrial and economic system..." bombing by day. Both Air Forces took aim at Hamburg, a shipbuilding center on the Elbe River.

Tami Davis Biddle, Historian: The Americans were interested in it because they wanted to attack the elements of the German war economy that were located in Hamburg. The British were interested in it because they wanted to take it down as a city.

Keith Lowe, Writer: There was another reason why they chose Hamburg it was because it was close. It was just a short hop across the North Sea. So, not only was it a very important target, it was also a very convenient one.

Narrator: Hamburg was the largest port in Germany and the country's second largest city with over one and-a-half million people. Among them, 10-year old Ralph Giordano.

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Ralph Giordano, Resident of Hamburg: Hamburg was my nest, my home. I had a wonderful and carefree childhood and a deep feeling of belonging to the city until I was 10 and Hitler came to power.

Hitler was very successful in winning over the masses, including the working people. I remember our neighbors who hung the hammer and sickle flag and were Communists. Then suddenly after 1933, the Swastika was hanging out in front of their house. I remember Hitler coming to Hamburg for the launching of a battleship in the Blohm & Voss shipyards. I wasn't standing in the front row, but I clearly remember the cheering people.

Narrator: The same shipyard was turning out the submarines that were wreaking havoc on Allied shipping in the Atlantic. And close by were important manufacturing centers for the German aircraft industry. Hamburg was exceptionally well defended. Air raid shelters, some in massively armored concrete towers, provided protection for nearly a quarter million people. With heavy flak guns on top they could fire shells four miles into the air.

Outside the city, interceptor bases were scattered along the North Sea, with 1,500 Messerschmitt 109s on constant alert. The challenge for the Allies was to evade those formidable defenses, controlled by a string of early warning radar stations. On Saturday, July 24th, 792 RAF bombers readied for a night attack on Hamburg, each loaded with high explosives and incendiary bombs. It was the first of a series of attacks that would continue for an entire week code-named Operation Gomorrah.

Keith Lowe, Writer: It was a hugely complicated operation getting all these 7- or 800 bombers into the sky without causing any collisions. They would take off one by one from each of the airfields, which lined the coast of Britain. Gradually they would assemble over the North Sea into a very long bomber stream. Tonight for the first time they were using a brand new secret weapon. The flight engineer would shovel out these silver foil strips. Each would

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show up on the German radar as a single blip. And the German defenses were completely negated.

Narrator: Between one and two am, more than 2,000 tons of high explosive bombs and over 350,000 incendiaries were dropped on the west side of the city. Ralph Giordano and his mother were in a shelter below.

Ralph Giordano, Resident of Hamburg: The people seemed paralyzed. Nothing moved; everyone thought it was “lights out” for him or her in a matter of seconds. The bombs howled down, and there was a gruesome noise... If you heard the noise, that meant the bomb was hitting someone else; the bombs that hit you were the ones you didn’t hear ahead of time.

Narrator: Then that afternoon came the Americans. 120 three B-17s, flying in broad daylight. Once airborne, the fleet assembled into box formations to defend themselves against enemy fighters. Harry Crosby, just out of college in Iowa, was a lead navigator.

Harry Crosby, Navigator, 8th Air Force: Hardest part was to get them all in order, because when we flew, we all followed the lead crew, which would be me. And if I didn’t find that target the work of a million Americans was wasted.

Keith Lowe, Writer: The Americans had a much more difficult job to do than the British did. Firstly, they weren’t bombing under cover of darkness and they didn’t have the benefits of this new radar-jamming device. So as soon as they approached German air space the German fighters were on them in a trice.

Narrator: The Nazi fighters did their share of damage, then peeled off as the bombers approached the city. Now the Americans faced an even more fearsome obstacle: the giant flak guns firing at them from below.

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Harry Crosby, Navigator, 8 Air Force: When people were shooting at you, you should be able to dodge, but you couldn't do it. You just had to go right straight on in.

Keith Lowe, Writer: When they arrived over Hamburg, the entire city was completely smothered in smoke. They couldn't see anything, let alone their targets. Then, almost by a miracle, a gap appeared and there they could see the Blohm & Voss shipyards.

Ralph Giordano, Resident of Hamburg: Midday on the 25th of July, the Americans came, and pelted the harbor.

Narrator: Hamburg's key shipyard was badly damaged. Along with an airplane engine factory, and a power station: military targets, rendered all but useless by American precision bombing. Then, on the fourth night, the RAF returned with more incendiaries. One of the pilots was 22-year old Bill McCrea.

Bill McCrea, Pilot, Royal Air Force: This was the big raid, the firestorm raid. We could see the fires an hour's flying from Hamburg, but when we got nearer we could see this tower, this pillar of smoke which was rising over 20,000 feet. It was just like an active volcano. The bombers went across dropping their bombs in there, which kept erupting, and shooting up these sparks and flame.

Ralph Giordano, Resident of Hamburg: Everything was crackling—the fire crackled. Within a short time the smell of burning was so strong that one had to leave the basement. It was burning all around, an inferno like no human imagination could picture, everything was ablaze, and constantly the bombs came down. I saw countless dead, burned people... people who had been burned and baked together like a piece of bread.

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Narrator: When Operation Gomorrah finally ended, there had been four British attacks on the city and two American raids on the port. The toll was 45,000 people killed; 60% of the city utterly destroyed.

Bill McCrea, Pilot, Royal Air Force: I wasn't thinking about the people on the ground. I was just thinking about myself and my crew. I had been ordered to do a job. I'd been ordered to put these bombs in the air and drop them on Hamburg and get back home so you could go again tomorrow night or the night after.

Harry Crosby, Navigator, 8th Air Force: There would be a bridge to hit or there would be a factory to hit, or there would be a gun emplacement to hit. And you never thought about any human beings there.

Keith Lowe, Writer: In the aftermath of the firestorm, almost a million refugees fled Hamburg and took with them stories of the most terrible horror that they had witnessed. This caused a panic across Germany, which was unlike anything that they'd ever experienced before.

Narrator: The panic extended to the highest reaches of the Third Reich. Hitler refused even to visit the devastated city, sending Luftwaffe head Herman Goering in his stead. His minister in charge of armaments warned that a series of similar Allied attacks would bring German war production to a complete halt.

Keith Lowe, Writer: And there were many who truly believed that the Germans would be forced to capitulate. The British establishment certainly thought that this might be the case, and there was a flurry of memos suggesting that perhaps the war might even be over by Christmas.

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Narrator: The war would not be over by Christmas; far from it. Allied airmen would still be sent out on missions from which many would not return. They would still confront a determined enemy that fought on despite relentless punishment. And the Americans would still insist, that despite the risks, pinpoint daylight bombing would win the war. In the aftermath of the Hamburg attacks, the American and British commanders remained committed to their sharply divergent strategies. Eaker continued to press precision attacks on industrial targets. Harris championed the bombing of cities. And the city he was focused on was the center and symbol of Nazi power: Berlin.

Sir Max Hastings, Historian: Berlin was almost Harris' nemesis. He allowed himself to become obsessed with it. He convinced himself that if he got 4,000 Lancaster sorties to Berlin, he could bring Germany to defeat, to surrender, by April the 1st, 1944. He gave an explicit date. He said in another memorandum that attacking Berlin might cost Bomber Command 4- or 500 aircraft, but it would cost Germany the war.

Narrator: Over six months, the head of Bomber Command sent his planes on 19 mass attacks on the Nazi capital. As many as 800 bombers on a single mission... nearly 11,000 bombing sorties. In the city below, over 10,000 civilians were killed. Nearly half a million made homeless. All this pain inflicted on Berlin in the hope that the Germans would rise up against Hitler.

Jorg Friedrich, Historian: That's the method of terror. You cannot torture 80 million Germans, but if you torture successfully 7 million in Berlin, the rest of Germany would come to their senses. So you need the theatre of pains. All German cities should witness the Hamburgization of Berlin, the great Sodom of modern ages. And then afterwards all the sinners would say, "Not me," and overthrow Hitler.

Donald L. Miller, Author, *Masters of the Air*: But in a police state, withdrawing support from the government means death. You're not going to have a mass uprising. So yes, morale was

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lowered, but it didn't matter. People still showed up for work, and they went about their lives – crushed, not believing in victory, but persisting.

Jorg Friedrich, Historian: Civilian populations have a special war aim, which is completely different from their leaders' war aims. It is a very simple one. The war aim of the civilian population is to survive.

Narrator: Despite the incessant bombing, the Nazis' hold on Berlin remained firm. But the RAF took tremendous punishment. More than 600 planes downed. Nearly 2,700 fliers killed. All with no discernible impact on German morale or productivity. In the midst of Harris's city-bombing campaign, the American airmen had been preparing for an important test of their own strategy. On the morning of August 17, 1943, General Eaker's fliers were briefed on their mission. Their primary target: ball bearing factories in the southern German city of Schweinfurt.

Tami Davis Biddle, Historian: Schweinfurt kind of crystallizes the entire American theory. Here are ball bearings, which are essential in virtually all industries – in the working of a modern industrial economy.

Donald L. Miller, Author, *Masters of the Air*: You need ball bearings for everything this is one of these choke point targets, that if you knock that out, without ball bearings, industry starts to break down.

Tami Davis Biddle, Historian: They were flying deep into Germany without fighter escort and because they were having to fly across enemy territory for a very long time they could be tracked and intercepted.

Narrator: Hundreds of Luftwaffe fighters took dead aim at the unescorted B-17s.

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Donald L. Miller, Author, *Masters of the Air*: These air battles are absolutely ferocious. And they're going in there naked, as it were. The plane is not pressurized so the mask is on and it's freezing, as low as 60 degrees below zero because the rear windows are actually gun portals and they're open to the air. So you're fighting the weather, you're fighting the Luftwaffe. And the Germans, you see, flying over their homeland, can land, re-arm, re-fuel, and up again. They're just pulverizing them all the way in.

Narrator: The crews that made it through the fighters were still at great risk. To bomb with precision, they had to approach the target flying straight and level through dense flak. They could not take evasive action until their payload was dropped. Even after the bombs were away, the American crews returning from Schweinfurt found themselves under withering fire from enemy fighters.

Donald L. Miller, Author, *Masters of the Air*: And it's a catastrophe. One of the guys in the planes said that he looked down on the ground, and he said, "My God, there's-there's haystacks burning all along the ground!" Well, they were B-17s. They lose 60 bombers. That's 600 men. It's the largest number of Americans lost on a single mission up to this point in the war. Staggering blow for the 8th Air Force.

Narrator: Despite the losses, Eaker sent his men on the same dangerous mission two months later.

Tami Davis Biddle, Historian: They went back to Schweinfurt in October of 1943. And in that raid the losses were truly devastating: another 60 bombers shot down; 138 damaged. You can't sustain that kind of loss levels over any period of time, and continue to have an offensive.

Donald L. Miller, Author, *Masters of the Air*: 77% of the guys who flew in the first months are casualties. You have a one in four chance of surviving.

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Harry Crosby, Navigator, 8th Air Force: You'd go out and come back, and part of your crew would be missing, part of your plane would be missing it was pretty hard on young kids.

Sam Halpert, Navigator, 8th Air Force: I was afraid, you know. But I just had to do it. 'Course the worst part was getting up the next day and doing it again.

Tami Davis Biddle, Historian: Crews are coming home and looking at empty bunks where their friends and their buddies were the night before. They're no longer there. Maybe they're alive in a prison camp somewhere, or maybe they're dead, but they're not there any longer.

Donald L. Miller, Author, *Masters of the Air*: The guys start to feel they're guinea pigs in an experiment that's not working.

Conrad Crane, Historian: No air force can survive 20% casualties in every mission. There's a growing sense of gloom and doom that they're not going to be able to win the war with this air weapon; that it's just becoming too costly and too dangerous.

Narrator: Eaker remained undeterred, his strategy unchanged. Precision bombing, he insisted, conducted by unescorted B-17s, could do the job.

Donald L. Miller, Author, *Masters of the Air*: He's terrifically stubborn. And he never, ever gets it out of his mind – out of his belief system, I should say – that this thing won't work; that unescorted bombers can go into the heart of the Reich, do heavy damage, and not take unsustainable losses. And he kept that belief stubbornly to the point where he was relieved of his command.

Narrator: In December, 1943, Spaatz replaced Eaker with a legendary airman, General Jimmy Doolittle.

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Jimmy Doolittle (archival): General Spaatz, distinguished guests, the strategic effort must go on and the better the strategic air effort is carried out, the shorter will be the war and the fewer of our boys will die.

Conrad Crane, Historian: Jimmy Doolittle is the charismatic combat leader. The first guy to bomb Tokyo. The first guy – he bombs Rome, he bombs Berlin. I mean he has his own fighter plane he flies around in the skies over the 8th Air Force. He’s a larger-than-life figure.

Narrator: Doolittle’s arsenal included an agile, new, long-range fighter, the P-51 Mustang. Now for the first time, the bombers could be protected deep into Germany and back. The Mustangs would prove crucial as Doolittle’s forces prepared the skies for the anticipated Allied land invasion, scheduled for spring: D-Day.

Sir Max Hastings, Historian: The foremost concern of the Allied commanders’ advance of D-Day was to ensure that they possessed absolute air superiority over Northwest France. And in order to achieve that, they set out to attack Germany’s aircraft factories for the first time escorted by the Mustang long-range fighter.

Jimmy Doolittle (archival): The 8th fighter command will give fighter cover to targets and back from the targets. It’s desirable that we peel off as many fighters as possible to come down and strafe ground targets.

Donald L. Miller, Author, *Masters of the Air*: The strategy now is: draw up the Luftwaffe by hitting things like aircraft factories that Hitler has to defend. He sends his force up, and the Mustangs massacre them. In addition, when you return from missions, you can drop off and fly low and strafe German airfields, destroying German aircraft on the ground.

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Narrator: For the Americans, the result was a dramatic change from the disasters at Schweinfurt. The Eighth Air Force destroyed twice as many enemy planes in March 1944 than had been downed in the previous two years. Three months later – on the shores of Normandy – the Air Force’s achievements paid off. The D-Day landing proceeded without interference from the air. The Luftwaffe was nowhere to be seen.

Donald L. Miller, Author, *Masters of the Air*: It’s the first great accomplishment of strategic bombing. We were destroying air frame factories, yes. We destroyed some ball bearing factories. But when you think of this, this is a world-turning event, D-Day. This, this is what turned the tide of the entire war in northern Europe. And it wasn’t possible without what the 8th Air Force had done.

Narrator: For Allied commanders, it was a crucial time. With the right strategy, the end of the war in Europe could be within reach.

Tami Davis Biddle, Historian: There was a lot of excitement about the fact that Germany might be at the precipice; Germany might be on the brink of collapse. And so ideas were developed for a major attack on the city of Berlin to shock the Germans into surrender.

Narrator: In the late summer of 1944, the British proposed “Operation Thunderclap” – the total devastation of the center of Berlin.

Tami Davis Biddle, Historian: Thunderclap looks distasteful to a number of the American air commanders because it looks like terror bombing. It looks like bombing for shock effect.

Narrator: In a letter to the Allied Supreme Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Spaatz expressed his objections; “The U.S. Bombing policy, as you know, has been directed against precision military objectives, and not morale. I am opposed to this operation as now planned.” That fall, the plan was tabled. The disagreement between the Allies rendered

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moot. But Eisenhower made it clear that the American Air Force should still be “prepared to take part in anything that gives real promise of ending the war quickly.”

In the fall of 1944, American planners sought to hasten Germany’s collapse by bombing targets identified by Allied intelligence as most critical at this stage of the war. To deprive the Nazi war machine of its lifeblood, American bombers zeroed in on the synthetic oil facilities spread across the German countryside. To disrupt the struggling Nazi economy, they targeted key railroad marshalling yards.

Donald L. Miller, Author, *Masters of the Air*: The Germans have to assemble these gigantic trains with thousands of cars at places called marshalling yards. So there you have this tremendous massing of economic power in these marshalling yards, these central marshalling yards. Hit them. But they’re inside or close to cities.

Narrator: The marshalling yards were often located near workers’ housing. When visibility was poor, and the Americans had to rely on their primitive radar, known as H2X; civilian casualties were unavoidable.

Tami Davis Biddle, Historian: H2X could not allow for precision targeting. It could allow for finding an area and bombing an area, but that’s about it.

Donald L. Miller, Author, *Masters of the Air*: You only have a hunch as to where the target is. And you bomb or you don’t bomb. Well, they bombed. There was never a question about stopping the bombing. It becomes a moral issue because if you continue to bomb like that you are hitting an awful lot of civilian targets -- homes -- and there’s a lot of collateral damage. So you’re nudging closer to the British concept of area bombing.

Narrator: Even as Allied bombing took its relentless toll, the Germans refused to give up. By the winter of 1944, hopes for a quick end to the war had been replaced by smoldering

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frustration. Nazi resistance had kept Allied troops from crossing into Germany. The Russians remained mired in Nazi-occupied Poland. Even a badly depleted German Army remained a formidable foe.

Jorg Friedrich, Historian: The Deutsche Wehrmacht was the most terrible, most ruthless, most spirited fighting force which was ever seen on any battleground. I don't say it with any pride. It was a terrible, aggressive machine, but with military capacity beyond any comparison.

Narrator: The Wehrmacht had launched a massive and unexpected counter-offensive – the Battle of the Bulge – which cost the Americans more lives than any other battle of the war. They had launched their own aerial terror weapons, the V-1 and V-2 rockets, raining destruction down on London. They had shocked the Allied air forces with the sudden appearance of the world's first jet fighter, the Messerschmitt 262. Now there were fears that Hitler might have one more surprise, perhaps big enough to turn the tide of war.

Tami Davis Biddle, Historian: There's a great deal of pessimism that starts to enter into Allied High Command, they start to think that the war may drag on, well into the summer and into the autumn of 1945. And this is a very frightening scenario.

Donald L. Miller, Author, *Masters of the Air*: The focus has to be Japan. We've got to finish off the Germans. There's this idea of an enemy they can't understand. An enemy that is beaten but won't surrender.

Narrator: There is intense pressure coming from the highest levels of command to bring the war in Europe to an end. Even Roosevelt, who had long decried the bombing of civilians, was now prepared to accept massive aerial bombardment.

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Tami Davis Biddle, Historian: And so what Allied planners do at this moment in time, this crucial moment in December and January of 1944-1945 is to look around and say: What instruments do we have to end this thing? To get this over with? And they recognized that if the war's going to end the Soviet winter offensive has got to make progress.

Narrator: That January, with the backing of Eisenhower, Spaatz revived Operation Thunderclap, the all-out assault on German morale he had once vehemently opposed. This time it would include attacks on transportation hubs in Leipzig and Dresden, to put pressure on German defenses on the Russian front. But the centerpiece of the operation, reversing years of American strategic policy, would be a massive air assault on Berlin.

Tami Davis Biddle, Historian: Doolittle is told that he will bomb the city of Berlin. This is different language. He's very uncomfortable with it. He's not comfortable with designating an entire city as a target. He protests to Spaatz and he says, "This is not what we do. We attack specific locations within cities. We may attack cities, but we're looking for marshalling yards, we're looking for factories, we're looking for specific sites within those."

Conrad Crane, Historian: And Spaatz says, "No. For this raid we have to bomb the- we're bombing the center of the city. This is an attack on the center of Berlin."

Narrator: Doolittle sent a hard-edged memo to his commanding officer. The Berlin attack, he wrote Spaatz, would "violate the basic American principle of precision bombing of targets of strictly military significance." Spaatz was unmoved. Operation Thunderclap – the all out attack on Berlin – would proceed as planned.

Conrad Crane, Historian: The Thunderclap raid is important in that it can clearly identify where the American Air Force says, "Yeah, we're going to destroy a city." And that's one of the things that made Doolittle so disturbed about it, because he says, 'We're really moving completely away from everything that makes us different, makes us unique, makes us more

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humane.” But he did it. He followed his orders and he did it. And you can argue that once you’ve done that once, it makes it easier to do again.

Narrator: On February 3rd 1945, 1,003 bomber crews were briefed for the largest American air mission of the war: an attack on Berlin – a city of nearly four million people. Sam Halpert was a navigator with the 91st bomber group.

Sam Halpert, Navigator, 8th Air Force: We were briefed to go to Berlin. The map of northern Europe was up there, and there was a ribbon going across, which was our route.

Narrator: Although the target designated by Spaatz was the city of Berlin, Doolittle did his best to give the crews aiming points with clear military value: train stations, marshalling yards, and Goering’s air ministry, just 500 meters from Hitler’s fortified bunker. The bombers, and their escorts, headed east.

Sam Halpert, Navigator, 8th Air Force: By then, the Luftwaffe had been pretty well beat up but they still had quite a bit of planes in force. As a matter of fact, they started sending up jet planes against us.

Narrator: After four hours flying time, the squadrons approached their target. Horst Sinske, a 15-year-old apprentice in an aircraft parts factory, studied the skies above.

Horst Sinske, Resident of Berlin: We saw the first lines of attack and thought, “this will have no end.” You could look over the roofs and see the flak tower of Friedrichshain. When the guns were pointed up, you knew that an attack was only 30 or 40 minutes away.

Sam Halpert, Navigator, 8th Air Force: When we approached the target, we’d start seeing the flak bursts come out. The closer you got, the more flak there was. And the pilots just had to ignore that and head right into it, when everything in their body was telling them, “Turn

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that plane around and get the heck out of there.” I don’t know what the geese feel like when the hunters are shooting at geese, you know, as they’re flying over a pond. What I kept in mind one thing, was that a lot of geese get shot but most of the geese get through.

Horst Sinske, Resident of Berlin: I heard the flak guns and decided to run. I knew that once a direct attack really got going, the doors to the air raid shelter would no longer be open. I knew that. And when I reached it, indeed, the doors were shut. I ran to a house nearby and they let me in.

Sam Halpert, Navigator, 8th Air Force: When we got over Berlin, sure enough, the lead ship was hit right in the middle maybe about five, ten yards beyond our wing. I could see bodies coming out. That’s what I remember. I didn’t see any parachutes I was pretty well shook up by that.

Narrator: That day, 21 B-17s were shot down over Berlin – but it was only a small fraction of the massive American fleet raining down devastation from above.

Horst Sinske, Resident of Berlin: A high explosive bomb hit directly outside the room was buried under a meter of rubble. On top was a child’s change purse and a little piece of cloth. And we thought that someone must have been buried. But we found no one. It was very still in the city after these attacks. The concentration camp inmates took the dead way. These people brought the corpses out quickly. And they threw them on the ruins. And the mountain got higher and higher. In the end it was two meters high. They were just thrown onto it.

Narrator: The February 3rd raid killed approximately 3,000 civilians. 120,000 Germans lost their homes. But this attack on Berlin would have a significance far beyond casualty numbers.

Donald L. Miller, Author, *Masters of the Air*: With this raid, the 8th Air Force crosses a moral threshold. And that moral threshold is, we will not deliberately bomb civilians. Usually

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the moral divide for historians is the Tokyo raid, which took place the next month, where we incinerate the city and kill almost 100,000 people. But I think, once we crossed the moral divide in Berlin, it made everything else, including the atomic bomb, a little bit easier.

Narrator: The war in Germany raged for three more brutal months. Months that saw the city of Dresden destroyed in a firestorm just weeks before American bombers burned Tokyo. Months that saw 200,000 Russian soldiers killed in the final assault on Berlin – an assault made possible, in no small part, by Allied bombing. In the end, the Nazi surrender that had seemed so close for months finally came, in May. The American air strategists could now devote their full attention to the urgent task of defeating Imperial Japan. The war had brought utter destruction to Germany, the nation that began it, and death to more than a hundred thousand British and American airmen. Half a million German civilians were killed by Allied bombing campaign, adding to more than 20 million civilian deaths in Europe as a result of this war.

Tami Davis Biddle, Historian: When democracies go to war and they find themselves in total wars, they have to work through a set of moral choices that are sometimes extremely difficult and extremely painful. Fighting Nazi Germany, in the end, meant fighting all out; meant utilizing every resource that we had. But in order to defeat this enemy we had to make some choices that were in some ways regrettable.

Donald L. Miller, Author, *Masters of the Air*: Wars are uncontrollable and no one knows how and why they get out of control, but they do. Witness Roosevelt's first statement about fighting a clean war and not wanting anybody to bomb children or innocents or anything like that. Wars just fly out of control.

Conrad Crane, Historian: I see this idea of just killing civilians and targeting civilians as being unethical – though the most unethical act in World War II for the Allies would have been allowing themselves to lose.

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