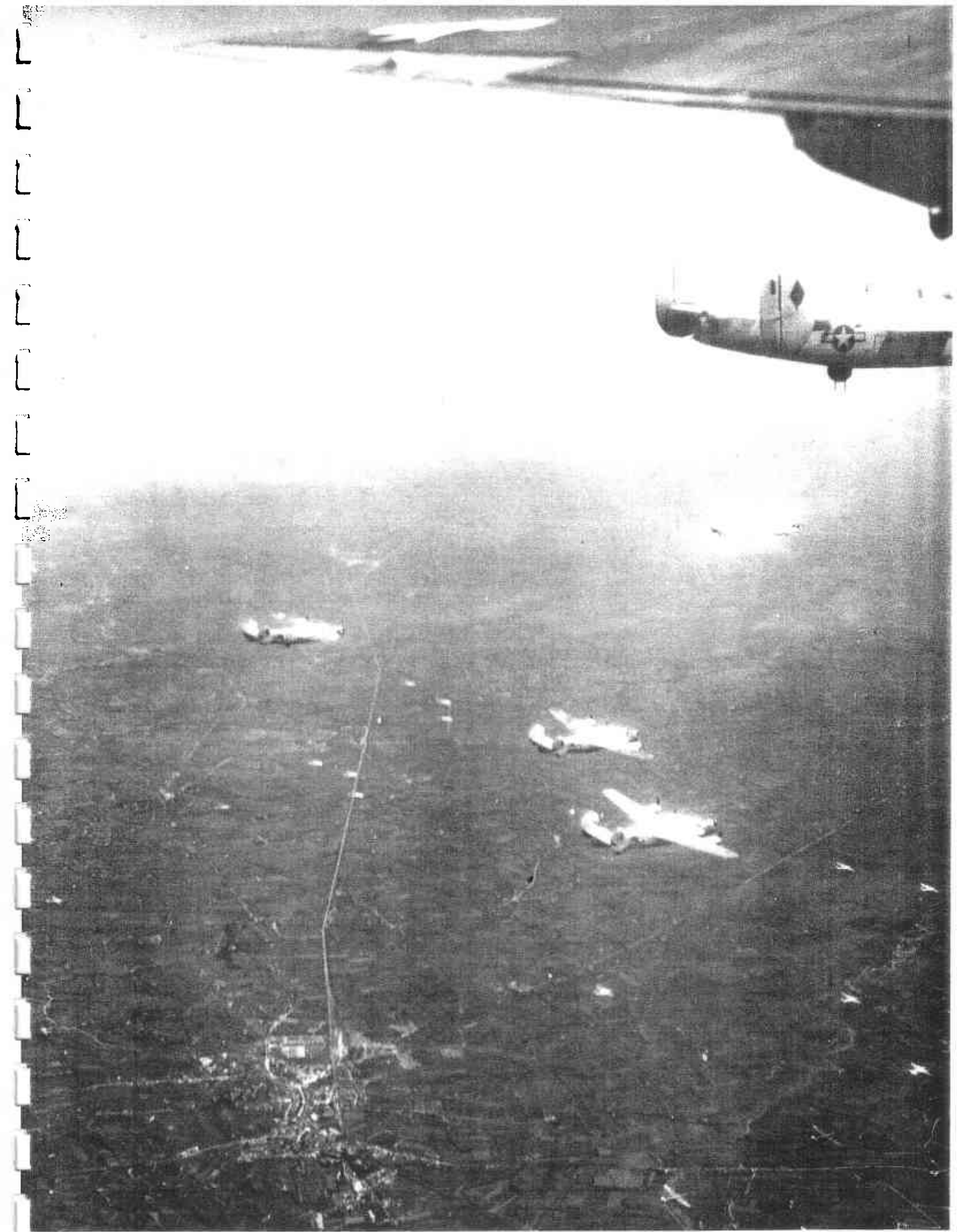
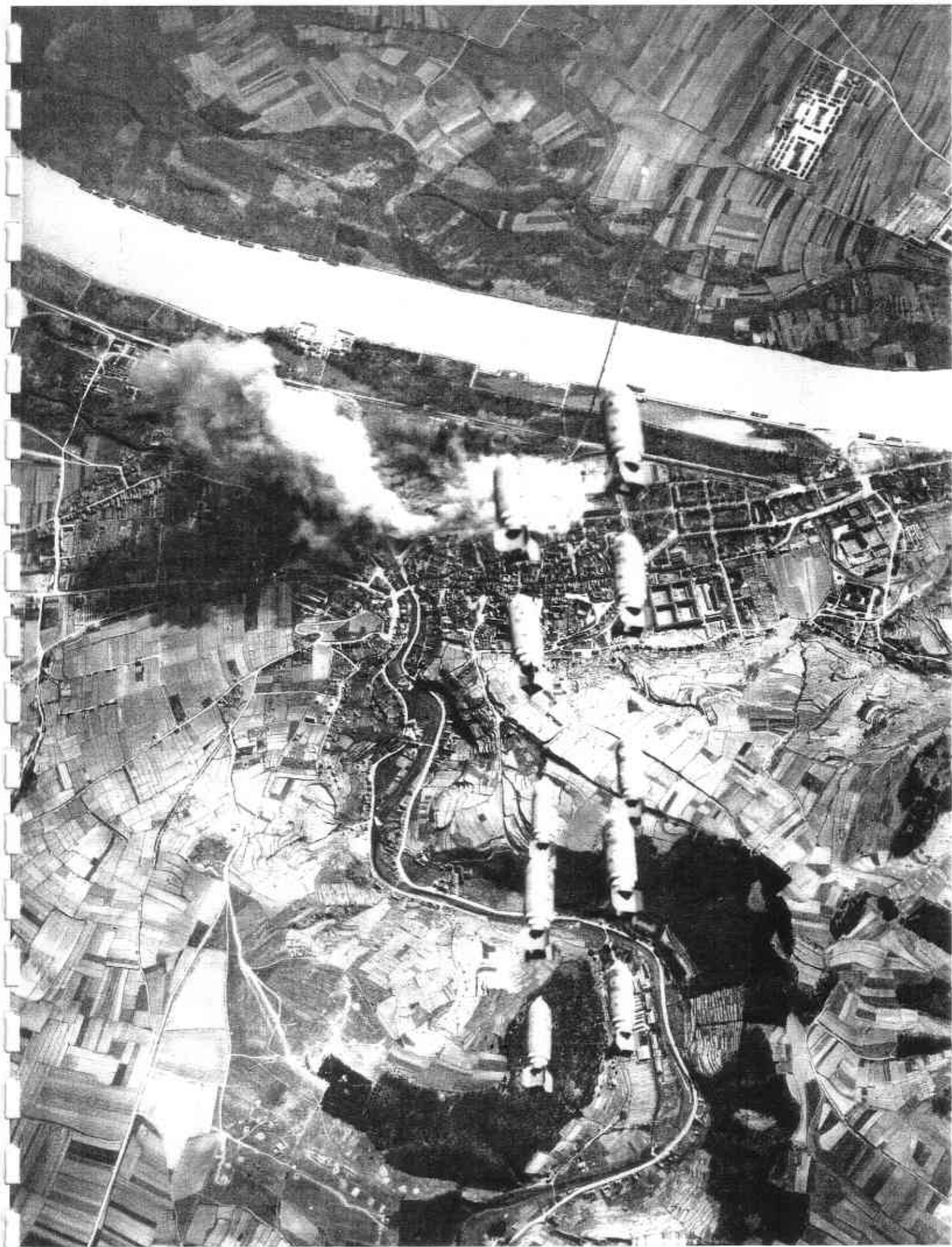




Flight of the Vulgar Vultures
1943-1945

AMERICAN BIRDING GROUP (ABG)





**The Story of the
Four Hundred and Fifty-fifth
Bombardment Group (H) WW II**

Flight of the Vulgar Vultures

By

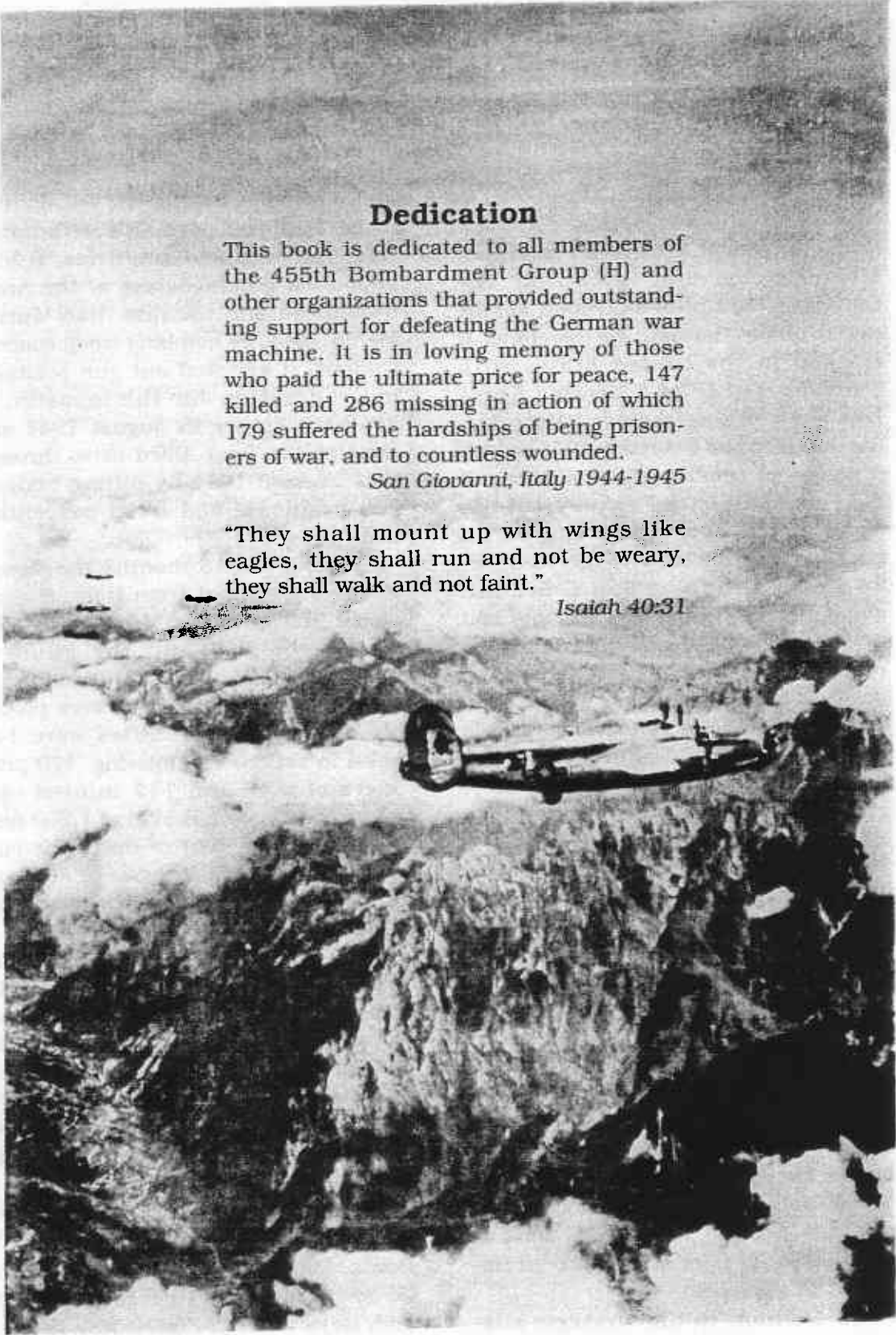
Alfred Asch, Colonel USAF (Retired)

Hugh R. Graff, Colonel USAF (Retired)

Thomas A. Ramey, Lieutenant Colonel USAF (Retired)

1991

Graphic Communications Center, Inc.
P.O. Box 357
213-217 East Washington Street
Appleton, Wisconsin 54912-0357



Dedication

This book is dedicated to all members of the 455th Bombardment Group (H) and other organizations that provided outstanding support for defeating the German war machine. It is in loving memory of those who paid the ultimate price for peace, 147 killed and 286 missing in action of which 179 suffered the hardships of being prisoners of war, and to countless wounded.

San Giovanni, Italy 1944-1945

"They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

Isaiah 40:31

Forward

The group was constituted as the 455th Bombardment Group (Heavy) United States Army Air Corps (AAC) in May 1943, and was activated the following month. It became an important strategic bombing group in the European Theatre of Operation for the defeat of the German war machine. It trained in the United States with Consolidated B-24 Liberator heavy bombers and then moved to Italy during January and February 1944, where it served in combat with the Fifteenth Air Force (AF) from February 1944 to April 1945. The Group shared an improvised airdrome with the 454th B-24 Bomb Group at San Giovanni, about five miles west of Cerignola and 20 miles southwest of Foggia. It engaged primarily in bombardment of strategic targets such as factories, marshalling yards, oil refineries, storage areas, harbors, and airdromes. These targets were in France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Austria, and the Balkans. The Group received a Distinguished Unit Citation (DUC) for a mission on 2 April 1944 when it contributed to the Fifteenth AF's campaign against enemy industry by attacking a ball bearing plant at Steyer, Austria. Another DUC was received for the bombing of the Moosbierbaum oil refinery at Vienna, Austria on 26 June 1944. The results were highly successful for both targets, but the costs were high. The Group was under severe fighter opposition and heavy barrages of flak and lost several bombers, four on the Steyer raid and ten at Moosbierbaum from a standard formation of 36 airplanes.

In addition to the strategic mis-

sions, the Group bombed troop concentrations, bridges, marshalling yards, and airdromes during the fall of 1944 to hamper the German's withdrawal from the occupied countries. It also supported ground forces at the Anzio beachhead and Cassino, Italy during March 1944, by bombing troop concentrations. It knocked out gun positions in preparation for the invasion of Southern France in August 1944 and assisted the final Allied drive through Italy in April 1945 by hitting bridges, gun positions, and troop concentrations.

During the 15 months the Group was flying combat from Italy, it completed 252 missions, dropped 14,702 tons of bombs, and the gunners destroyed 119 enemy fighter aircraft. Another 78 enemy aircraft were probably destroyed. Casualties were 147 killed in action, 268 missing, 173 prisoners of war, and 112 injured and returned to action. A total of 1,200 men completed their tour of duty. The outstanding performances can be attributed to the dedication of the air crews and the ground echelon.

The Group participated in the following campaigns: Air Combat, EAME Theatre; Air Offensive, Europe; Anzio; Rome-Arno; Normandy; Northern and Southern France; North Apennines; Rhineland; Central Europe; and, the Po Valley. Group commanders were: Colonel Kenneth A. Cool, July 1943 to September 1944; Colonel William I. Snowden, September 1944 to May 1945; Lieutenant Colonel William R. Boutz, May 1945 to July 1945; Major Jerome Hoss, July 1945 to July 1946; and, Major John C. Smith, July 1946.

In the Beginning

In the beginning, the 455th Bombardment Group was only an idea. Planning for air defense and the defeat of the Axis Powers occurred much earlier than the actual declaration of war in December 1941. At that time, the Air Force was part of the Army and was called the United States Army Air Corps (AAC). The Army Chief of Staff was General George C. Marshall with General Henry Hawley "Hap" Arnold, Chief of Staff of the AAC, reporting to General Marshall. There was a civilian post for Assistant Secretary of War for Air that President Roosevelt declined to fill the first eight years of his administration.

With a full scale war threatening in Europe, President Roosevelt in January 1939, declared that American defenses were "utterly inadequate." The AAC had only 1,700 aircraft and 1,600 officers. Projections were made by the AAC planners to determine the size and composition of the necessary forces to defend the Western Hemisphere. World events were changing so rapidly that it was almost impossible to determine requirements. Within just one year, estimates went from 24 air combat-ready groups to 84, with a force of 5,500 airplanes. This was considered large enough to make a dictator think twice before attacking North or South America. The planners, however, simply did not envision fighting a war on the massive scale then being conducted in Europe. They and the American public were taken completely by surprise by the President suddenly calling for 50,000 airplanes, an unbelievable number. There was a new-found attraction for air power by the President and he appointed Robert

A. Lovett to the post of Assistant Secretary of War for Air.

A major problem in the planning process was determining the force structure. Should America have an independent air force of heavy bombers for strikes against the enemy's industrial/military complex, or a ground support arm of attack with observation and medium aircraft? There were strong proponents for both positions, but a position was not taken to develop drop tanks or other range extension devices for the pursuit aircraft that would allow the escorting of heavy bombers over long distances. The irony of this struggle was that few aircraft were actually built in the early stages.

The Air Corps had been pushing expansion for years. The President's 50,000 aircraft announcement provided an opportunity to move forward. Not only did the President want a strong U.S. Air Corps, he also wanted to supply the British, French, Chinese, and others with aircraft. The aircraft industry was just emerging from the depression years and orders for new aircraft were most welcome. However, there simply was not enough production capacity in place to build an adequate U.S. Air Corps and meet the requirements of our future allies.

With the Germans overrunning the European countries and the withdrawal of British troops at Dunkirk, President Roosevelt was becoming more concerned about the outcome of the war in Europe. Further, the Japanese were waging one successful campaign after another in the Far East. On 9 July 1941, he sent a letter to the Secretaries of War and Navy asking for a detailed

plan for a build-up of U.S. forces sufficient to defeat the Axis powers in Europe should the United States be drawn into the war. Just four weeks prior to the President's letter, General Arnold had established an Air Wars Plans Division (AWPD). Four of the most experienced Army Air Corps flying officers were assigned to AWPD to develop an air war plan that would become an annex to a larger plan that included ground warfare. They were given just nine days to complete a plan. This corresponded with President Roosevelt, Generals Marshall and Arnold, and others returning from a meeting with England's Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, held on the battleship, Prince of Wales, anchored in Placentia Bay at Newfoundland. The stated purpose of the meeting was to consider ways to strengthen Britain without sending Americans into combat.

Keeping the United States out of the conflict was emphasized at two press conferences immediately following the President's return to Washington. One, on 16 August 1941, where the President said the United States was no closer to entering the war and, on 19 August, he stated that Churchill was extremely confident of Britain's ability to win the war without United States entry. These statements were made at the same time air and other war plans were being written for the United States to defeat the Axis Powers.

At the meeting, the British announced a requirement for a fighting air strength of 10,000 airplanes, of which 4,000 would be heavy bombers. General Arnold was surprised by the large numbers and wondered where the airplanes would come from as the production capacity of the British was 500 airplanes of all types per month. He soon learned why the British requested

500 airplanes per month from the U.S. This closely matched the production capacity of the U.S. at that time. This would leave nothing for the U.S. Army AAC and Navy as well as other countries, for instance, China. The British requirement would place a tremendous demand on the production capacity of the U.S. to satisfy all requirements.

Developing the Air War Plan was a monumental task. The planners had to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the potential enemy and then predict the kinds and amounts of munitions and equipment needed to win a war. Following this, a determination had to be made for the number of men needed and the best way of allocating and training them. The planners also had to take into consideration the possible fall of England, denying air bases close to Germany. Thus, the plan called for development of a very long range bomber that could operate from the United States, the B-36.

The assumption about the German economy was that it was operating under heavy strain with its war operations imposing a very heavy drain on the social and economic structure of the country. Destruction of that structure would break down the capacity of the German nation to wage war. It was not known that the German economy was devoting only 49% of the gross national product (GNP) to war costs in 1941 and that later it would increase the effort to 64% of GNP. Further, it could not be predicted that the Germans would develop new manufacturing techniques to greatly strengthen their industry, more than tripling armament production by July 1944, while reducing the number of workers per unit by 60%.

The Plan was completed in nine days and was named AWPD-1. Briefings were prepared to carry it through the

approval process. The Plan called for 21,813 combat airplanes, not counting monthly replacements, and 2,164,916 uniformed personnel in the AAC. Of the total number of airplanes, 6,860 heavy bombers alone were estimated as needed to destroy principal targets in Germany and German-held territory. The planners were rightly concerned about the approval response when requesting a number of airplanes of all types (combat and support) more than ten times the 5,500 projected in 1939. Equal concern was felt about the manpower in that the AAC, in August 1941, was just growing toward its authorized personnel limit of 152,000 compared to the total Army strength of 1,531,800. The Plan proposed to recruit, train, and equip within two and one-half years an Air Force that would outnumber by one-half million the entire 1941 Army. It is ironic that at the same time, Congress was debating to release 669,500 men drafted for the Army during 1940 for one year and there was considerable opposition to the United States entering the war by the American public. There was labor unrest and the Office of Production Management announced that a large number of factories might be forced to close within a year because of inadequate supplies of aluminum, copper, nickel, alloy steel, tungsten, zinc, and tin. Nevertheless, AWPD-1 was approved with little difficulty. The planners had done their homework.

The planning group started with determining what bombing accuracy could be expected from 20,000 feet by using training data and experience information furnished by the British. Related factors had to be considered such as unfavorable weather, camouflaged targets, anti-aircraft artillery, and enemy fighters. The planners finally

arrived at requiring 30 group missions to achieve 90% probability of destroying a target. Intelligence information about the target system was obtained from the British. The types of targets considered were Germany's electrical systems, transportation systems, oil refineries, aircraft factories, aluminum and magnesium plants.

The planners arrived at 98 heavy bomber groups to destroy these targets by applying the planning factors against the target structure and with the assumption there would be six months of all-out offensive running from April to September 1944. Each group would have 72 airplanes with the use of 36 for each mission. A bomb group could be expected to fly eight missions per month, or 48 in six months. The number of combat bombers would dictate the number of air bases, fighters to defend the bases, support aircraft, training, and so forth. Little did the planners know that the Germans would develop a capability to restore bomb damage and be back into production within a very short time.

The forward bases became another problem. There were only a total of 39 bases in Britain and British-controlled land areas in the Mediterranean region, e.g., Egypt and Palestine, that would accommodate heavy bombers. Considering the total number of airplanes to carry the war to Germany, another 117 bases would be required for bomber, fighter, and support aircraft. The Suez area was considered for building air bases although there would be problems of construction materials, water, and supply difficulties. Heavy bomber bases would have priority over fighter bases. The attitude was that the bombers could get through enemy opposition without fighter escort although heavy losses could be expect-

ed. Coupled with the plan were three broad assumptions: 1) There would be a holding action in the Pacific if war should break out there with U.S. involvement; 2) Conduct an active defense of North and South America; and, 3) Launch a European offensive to defeat Germany as soon as possible should the U.S. become involved.

There continued to be opposition to the U.S. becoming involved in a war with Germany and Japan by some elements of Congress and the American public. The AWPDP-1 and the corresponding Army and Navy plans were leaked to the press on 4 December 1941. The *Chicago Tribune* and the *Washington Times Herald* published the contents of the plans in spite of their high security classification. President Roosevelt's opponents pointed to the plan as proof of him leading the U.S. into a major war. The source of the leak was not definitely found nor would anybody in the government admit the plans were valid or approved by the War Department. Nevertheless, the German General Staff took them seriously and recommended to Hitler certain actions, among them was to stabilize the Russian front, begin renewed war activity against Britain and launch immediate attacks on all American shipping.

On 8 December 1941, Hitler, having just returned to Berlin from the Russian front, approved the recommendations of his staff. By then, the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor, but Germany and the United States had not declared war on each other. On 11 December 1941, Hitler declared war on the United States and cited the war plans as major provocations. This resulted in a "Fuhrer Directive Number 39" which included: steps for ending the Russian campaign without complete victory and establishing a strong defen-

sive line in Russia; moving enough forces into the Mediterranean area to completely secure it, thus denying American bases there for striking German targets; developing massive air defenses around German industrial targets; and, increasing air and naval attacks in the Atlantic to isolate England and prevent the United States from moving forces to Europe.

Soon after this, Hitler returned to the Russian front and became outraged by the success of Russian counterattacks along the line. He had intended to advance past Moscow and Leningrad before establishing a defensive line for the winter. He held General Field Marshall von Brauchitsch, commander of the entire German Army, responsible. He advised Hitler to withdraw to safer defensive positions as Germany was ill-equipped to fight a war in Russia because of the severe winter weather. Thereupon, Hitler fired von Brauchitsch and he assumed command of the German Army. He ordered the positions to be maintained and planned a renewal offensive for the spring. This spelled the end of Directive 39, as the Russians inflicted heavy losses on the German Army during the winter months. Over 100 divisions that might have been shifted to the Mediterranean remained committed to the Eastern Front.

The irrational actions by Hitler made it possible to implement AWPDP-1. The German Army and a significant part of the Luftwaffe became "bogged" down in Russia. This opened the way for the invasion of North Africa by the United States and it permitted British General Montgomery and American forces to push the German and Italian forces from all of Africa. Subsequently, the invasion of Sicily and Italy gave the Allies air bases which would be used to bomb the "underbelly" of the German

military/industrial complex. The might of the 15th Air Force from Italy coupled with the mighty 8th Air Force from England eventually rendered the German industrial complex and Luftwaffe almost useless. Had Hitler been more rational and taken the advice from his General Staff, the results of the war would probably have been much different. Certainly, the war planning would have required major changes, placing more emphasis on developing a bomber that could operate from the United States to hit German targets, the B-36.

President Roosevelt requested updating of the war plans in August 1942. The updated air plan was called AWPD-2. There were some changes made, but the basic plan remained intact. The target structure had some changes, e.g., ball bearing plants and submarine pens were added and given high priority. German bombers had earlier disrupted British engine production with a single strike on a bearing factory, causing British and American planners to suspect that German production might similarly be vulnerable. Further,

the submarine menace was taking its toll on North Atlantic shipping. Also, the planners correctly foresaw a high priority for destroying the German Air Force, aircraft factories, petroleum refineries, synthetic fuel plants and transportation networks. At a time when work stoppages had been slowing American industrial production, the AWPD-2 envisioned an industrial expansion to provide a force of 7,097 heavy bombers, not counting the very long range B-36. In March 1945, a total of 7,177 American bombers were flying combat missions in Europe. The planners had done their job well. The AWPD-2 recognized that England would survive thereby reducing the need for development and production of the B-36. However, a serious shortcoming was the continuing failure to recognize the need for long range fighter escort for the bombers.

With the declaration of war, the labor problems in the U.S. started to disappear. Industry converted to wartime production and the Americans fully supported the war effort.



COLONEL KENNETH A. COOL

Colonel Cool was a native Ohioan, residing in Cleveland. He attended flying school at Randolf Field, Texas in the late twenties following graduating from Rutgers University. After receiving his commission, he flew the US Air Mail as well as being a member of the Ohio National Guard during the thirties. In 1941, Colonel Cool was called to active duty to serve his country for command duties as a senior pilot. He served in command positions with the 93rd Bombardment Group and flew combat missions in B-24's from England, North Africa and the Middle East during the latter part of 1942 and the first half of 1943. Colonel Cool was then selected to return to the United States to assume command of the 455th Bombardment Group. He led the Group through training, equipping and deployment to Italy where he remained in command through more than 100 combat missions. Colonel Cool was transferred to the 304th Wing Headquarters as Operations Officer on 28 September 1944.

Activation and Training



With the war successes in Europe and the Pacific and the validation of daylight high altitude bombing, the 455th Bomb Group (H) no longer remained just a number in a war plan. General Order No. 1, dated 8 July 1943 of the 455th, cited the authority for activation of the Group. The authority was paragraph 1, General Order 74 by Headquarters, Second Air Force, Fort George Wright, Washington, dated 22 May 1943. The four bomb squadrons, 740th, 741st, 742nd, and 743rd were activated soon after. The organization was without personnel.

The actual organization of the Group was accomplished at the Clovis Army Air Base (AAB) in New Mexico under the provisions of a letter from Headquarters, Second Air Force. Lt. Colonel Kenneth A. Cool assumed command of the Group under the 455th, General Order No. 1 cited above. He, with four other officers (Captains William E. Keefer, Frank J. Rinehart, David S. Thayer and 1st Lt. Alfred Asch), had just returned from flying combat in Consolidated B-24 Liberators with the 93rd Bomb Group which operated from England and Africa. The initial assignment of officers to Group Headquarters was as follows: Lt. Colonel Kenneth A. Cool, Commander; Capt. David W. Harp, Deputy Group

Commander; Major Philip J. John, Executive Officer; Capt. Carroll A. Olsen, Adjutant; Capt. Alvin E. Coons, Intelligence Officer; Capt. Hugh R. Graff, Operations Officer; 1st Lt. Forest A. Harding, Engineering Officer. The squadron commanders were appointed soon thereafter. They were: Capt. William E. Keefer, 740th Bomb Squadron; Capt. Horace W. Lanford, Jr., 741st Bomb Squadron; Capt. Edwin C. Ambrosen, 742nd Bomb Squadron; Capt. David S. Thayer, 743rd Bomb Squadron. Most of the original personnel making up the 455th cadre were transferred from the 302nd Bomb Group (H) at Clovis AAB per Special Order No. 179, Headquarters AAB Clovis, 16 July 1943.

The four squadrons were organized to operate as independent combat units. They consisted of all organizational elements needed to operate, including squadron administration, operations, maintenance, supply, organization equipment, intelligence, signal, medical, ordinance, armament, messing, special services, and security. All the aircraft were assigned to each squadron.

The Group Headquarters served the staff functions of planning, coordinating, directing, training, administration, logistical support, intelligence, weather