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BACKGROUND PAPER

ON

OPERATION FRANTIC

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OPERATION FRANTIC

1. Most historians call it a World War II failure, and seem to avoid the topic altogether. Maybe they don't say much about it because they're afraid it will hurt their book sales. Whatever their reasons, Operation FRANTIC is part of our American history, and a number of men made the ultimate sacrifice during it. This background paper will help you gain a better appreciation for this historical event in our American history. Focusing on enlisted participation we will discuss preparations for FRANTIC; then we'll look at the first mission before highlighting events leading to discontinuance of the operation. We'll consider initial reasons for FRANTIC, the American proposal to the Soviets, and Soviet reaction. Then we'll discuss operational objectives and preparations before considering enlisted involvement and troop movement. As we continue, we'll go on to learn some of the details during first mission and generally discuss FRANTIC missions throughout the summer of 1944 and discontinuance of the operations. With all this in mind, let's see what FRANTIC was all about.

2. So, what possessed the United States to move forward with FRANTIC—how did it all begin and what were the overarching reasons? The idea of shuttle-bombing missions flying from Royal Air Forces bases in the United Kingdom (UK), and later Italy, to bases in the Soviet Union (USSR) had its roots in the Air War Plans Division I (AWPD-1) planning document released in August 1941. According to Mark J Conversino, historian and author of the book *Fighting With the Soviets,* the

AWPD-1 outlined the role and use of strategic air power calling for over three thousand heavy

bombers to carry out raids over Germany which would require airfields in the United Kingdom, the Middle East, Iceland, and the Soviet Union. The AWPD's primary goal for FRANTIC, as it related to Nazi Germany, was to eliminate "vital targets" including primarily electric power, transportation, and oil; a secondary goal was to neutralize the *Luftwaffe*, Germany's air force. (3:4+) The Americans also had goals relating to the Soviets—they wanted to improve their relationship with the Soviet Union hoping to later gain use of bases in Siberia to deal with Japan. American military planners hoped they could improve the chances for using these bases by helping the Soviets with the Eastern European front. With these objectives in mind, it was time to broach the subject with the Soviets.

3. The Americans first raised the idea to the Soviets during meetings in Moscow in October 1943. President Roosevelt appointed W. Averell Harriman as the new US ambassador to the Soviet Union and General John R. Deane was appointed as chief of the newly established US Military Mission in Moscow. General Hoyt S. Vandeneburg, a member of General Arnold's Army Air Corps staff, also went to Moscow with the job of selling the idea of using Soviet bases to carry out strategic bombing. The overall objectives of the meeting in Moscow were to prepare topics for the Teheran Conference planned for November and to assure the Soviets the western allies were doing everything within their power to help the Soviets against the Nazi eastern front. Historian Conversino indicated the Moscow meeting went well, and General Deane offered three American proposals to the Soviets: "...to effect shuttle bombing targets in German-held eastern Europe, the Soviets provide bases on their soil on which US AAF aircraft could be refueled, repaired, and rearmed; that the US and USSR improve signal communication for a more efficient exchange of weather information; and that the two nations cooperate to improve air

transportation between them." Two days later the Soviets agreed "in principle" to the proposals, but General Deane discovered it didn't mean much. The Soviets attending the meeting would not include the proposals in their final communiqué about the meeting to Stalin. General Vandenberg didn't have any luck with the proposals the following week when he met with Soviet Colonel General A.V. Nikitin. (3:28) The idea of using Soviet bases for shuttle bombing seemed to be a bust, so General Arnold spoke to President Roosevelt about the stall by the Soviets; he agreed to bring it up at the conference in Teheran.

4. The "Big Three", Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill, met in Teheran, Iran on 27 November 1943. The purpose of meeting over the next few days, as stated by author Conversino, was to discuss the defeat of the Axis powers and the maintenance of peace following the war. (3:28) But, President Roosevelt also asked Stalin to support the shuttle-bombing plan General Deane had offered at the meeting in Moscow the previous month. By the time the conference was over, Stalin told Roosevelt he didn't have time to look at the proposal, so he would give him an answer later. The Soviets, for a second time, didn't appear to be very anxious to work out a deal on the American use of their bases. Several weeks went by before the Americans saw the effect of Roosevelt's proposal to Stalin at the Teheran Conference.

5. It wasn't until 26 December the same year before the Soviets showed any interest in the shuttle-bombing proposal. Historian Conversino states that Soviet General Molotov gave US Ambassador Harriman a memorandum from Stalin indicating his approval for the proposal "in principle." (3:29) But this time General Molotov assured the Ambassador they would begin work to integrate American shuttle bombing using Soviet bases into their war plans. The

Americans were elated…the hard work and persistence on this shuttle-bombing proposal finally paid off, and they were anxious to begin operational planning.

6. The overall objectives from higher American command levels in the early stages of operational planning were somewhat different, or less focused than the objectives as seen through the eyes of the numbered air forces like the Fifteenth Air Force (AF). From an Army Air Force (AAF) perspective, General Arnold as Commanding Officer, there were a number of objectives as detailed by author Conversino. Militarily, the AAF wanted to be able to attack Germany and its occupied territories from all sides, but primarily the eastern occupied areas, in order to cause Germany to disperse its aircraft prior to the Normandy landing planned for June 1944. Bombers would hit targets in Eastern Europe enroute from the UK or Italy to bases in the USSR. They would bomb more targets on the return flight to their home bases. The US also wanted to develop better relationships with the Soviets and set a precedent of using bases in the Soviet Union hoping to pave the way for US use of bases in Siberia. This would give the US strategic positions to strike targets in Japan. (3:21-23) But from a lower echelon perspective, Colonel C. A. Young, Assistant Chief of Staff, 15th AF stated in an interview with 15th AF historian Lt. W. W. Taylor that he believed the primary objective was "…to support the Russian ground battle by attacks against lines of communications, supply installations, particularly oil and fuel dumps, and to conduct counter air force operations." (13:2). As conceived the operation would involve allied aircraft (American anyway) bombing key targets in Eastern Europe and landing at Soviet bases in the Ukraine. Many of these targets were out of range for American-based air forces in Great Britain and Italy. Although agreed upon, it appeared the Soviets still didn't have much interest, because they dragged their feet on which bases would be used and

limited the number of American military personnel allowed into the USSR. Although envisioned differently by different participants, operational preparations for Operation FRANTIC began in April 1944.

7. The US Strategic Air Forces in Europe (USSTAFE), commanded by Lieutenant General Carl A. Spaatz, took the lead in operational plans for FRANTIC upon directions from higher headquarters. He appointed Colonel John S. Griffith as the commanding officer of the project. They had to work out which Soviet bases to use, select American units to participate, and determine which aircraft to use. According to Colonel C. A. Young, the US worked out an agreement with the USSR to use three bases in the Ukraine: Poltava, Mirgorod, and Piryatin. After negotiating with the Soviets on number of American personnel that would be assigned to the three bases, they agreed on 1200 including headquarters personnel assigned to USSTAFE's Eastern Command established at Poltava but not including aircrews. (13:1) According to a US Military Mission in Moscow message, HQ 5th Wing Operations Order 569, and 15th AF Operations Plan for FRANTIC, four B-17 bomber groups from 15th AF's 5th Wing would fly the initial mission, named "FRANTIC JOE", scheduled for 2 June 1944: 99th, 97th, 2nd, and 483rd Bomb Groups. P-51 B's from the 325th Fighter Group of the 306th Wing would provide escort. (7:1; 9:1; 11:2) Major General F. L. Anderson, USSTAFE Deputy Commander for Operations instructed Eighth Air Force to prepare for participation FRANTIC operations after 15 June. (12:1) With these operational questions answered, let's look at some of the personnel issues in more detail.

8. Although the Soviets were providing housing, messing and other similar support, the US still required about 1220 personnel on the ground. During an Air Service Command (ASC)

USSTAFE staff meeting on 6 May 1944, officers representing their respective directorates gave a status of FRANTIC accomplishments including personnel. Most US personnel on the ground in the USSR were enlisted. They played a vital role in Transportation, Aircraft Maintenance, Supply, Chemical, Medical, Engineering, Ordnance, and Signal Maintenance. In particular, additional requirements for a Crew Chief and assistant for each B-17, P-51, and P-38 were noted as well as one Armament specialist for every three P-51s. In addition, Operations as well as Intelligence personnel were still required. (1:1-2) Lastly, 8th AF identified 22 Interpreter Specialists to go to the USSR to bridge the language gap…17 were enlisted. (4:1) But, enlisted personnel on the ground played only part of the enlisted role, most of the B-17G aircrew members were enlisted.

9. Many historians write about aircraft that flew during a particular operation and focus on the pilot and maybe the copilot, but I'm going to tell you about the jobs of the enlisted aircrew members. In describing the B-17G, type of bomber used during Operation FRANTIC, author Conversino indicated it was fitted with 13 gunner positions for use as defense for the aircraft. (3:3) But not all 13 were manned at any given time; in fact, there were usually seven or eight enlisted aircrew members on each aircraft. Crew members were normally assigned to the following positions: Tail gunner; top turret; right waist gunner; left waist gunner; and ball turret. Other gunner positions were filled as needed depending the attacking position of enemy aircraft. Additionally, 15th AF listed a radio operator and sometimes a photographer among the cadre of enlisted crew members as well as some maintenance personnel in the following specialties: turret, armament, propeller, electrical, parachute rigger, engineering, and bombsight. (10:2; 5:1) These specialists supplemented maintenance personnel on the ground at the bases in

the USSR. The point I'm making here is most of the aircrews were enlisted and played a vital role in Operation FRANTIC—every person aboard the aircraft contributed to the success of the mission. Since there were so many people involved in this operation, how did they all get to their assigned bases in the Ukraine?

10. A summary by ASC USSTAFE on 31 May 1944 indicated they had moved the majority of maintenance and support personnel, 1221 total, to the USSR over a period of about two months beginning on March 17, 1944. (2:1) Although a few staff personnel had already made their journey to the bases in the Ukraine, major troop movements began with the Third Echelon. The Americans were anxious to get things rolling in order to be mission capable in June prior to the Normandy landing, but the Soviets hadn't approved group visas delaying American troop entry into the USSR. In fact General Deane, Commanding Officer of the US Military Mission in Moscow, wanted the three Soviet bases operational by mid-May according to historian Conversino. (3:53) To the Americans' dismay, the Soviets seemed to be slow rolling the approval of group visas for the troops. Those who had left the UK on 17 March had to wait in Teheran, Iran, the major transit stop for troops entering the USSR. On 22 April the Soviets, under pressure form the US, approved the group visas. Conversino pointed out that through the whole ordeal, the enlisted personnel didn't know where they were going, they only knew they were attached to Detachment 5, ASC USSTAFE and that they were part of a secret "special project." (3:54) Additionally, 30 maintenance personnel (primarily P-51 mechanics) would fly on board aircraft participating in operational missions. Fifteenth AF felt these personnel were at greater risk if they were on the ground in the USSR…their loss would be too great a "blow."

(6:1) With the movement of personnel near completion on 31 May, the operational mission was about to begin.

11. General Deane announced in a message to General Spaatz, the first shuttle-bombing mission was about to begin on 2 June 1944. (11:2) As Colonel C. A. Young, 5th Wing, and historian Conversino noted, one hundred twenty-eight B-17 bombers (32 from each of the four bomber groups) and 70 P-51's left their bases in Italy early on the morning of the second and formed over the Adriatic Sea. (13:3; 9:1) They were joined there by Lieutenant General Eaker, Commanding Officer of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces who was on board the B-17 known as "Yankee Doodle II" assigned to the 97th Bomb Group. (3:62) Operations Order 569 from the 5th Wing detailed the mission for 2 June; their target: the marshaling yards and railway works at Debreczen, Hungary. (9:1) All groups successfully hit their targets and continued on to the Ukraine. Colonel C. A. Young and author Conversino indicated only one B-17 was lost during the mission when an engine caught fire and the aircraft blew up over the target area...all crew members were lost. (13:3; 3:63) The loading list for this aircraft, tail number 42-30319, indicated there were seven enlisted air crew members on board: SSgt Charles Cullum; SSgt Robert Carberry; MSgt John J. Sekina; Sgt Walter Bazia; Sgt James Whitty; TSgt Ray May; and Austin J. Cronin. (8:1; 14:2) With the primary objective out of the way, it was time for the aircrews to fulfill their second objective—to impress the Soviets.

12. The American aircrews were about to put on the "Ritz" for their Soviet partners to further strengthen the bond between the two nations. In C. A. Young's interview, he said the weather at the base in Poltava was "very bad" with a 500 foot ceiling. The groups arrived not only on schedule, but in formation. Both American correspondents and Russian officials were

"...tremendously impressed by the air discipline and the professional competence of the units." The crews maintained exceptional military bearing and "smart" appearance. (13:3) The crews were very instrumental in easing the minds of Soviet officials making targeting for future missions favorable to American desires.

13. Operation FRANTIC continued through the summer of 1944 with a total of eight named FRANTIC operations involving several bombing and strafing runs on targets. The bombers were also used to deliver food and supplies to starving Warsaw, Poland during FRANTIC VII with limited success. Author Conversino indicated FRANTIC VIII would also have been a humanitarian run on 1 October 1944 but was delayed for weather and called off altogether on 3 October. Soviet intelligence indicated the Poles had surrendered to the Germans, so the Soviets would not approve the mission. Without the use of Soviet bases, the mission was impossible. (3:157) American/Soviet relations became strained not only because of disagreements on supply runs to Warsaw, but because the Soviets lost interest and didn't see a continuing need for further FRANTIC missions. They wanted to put an end to the US use of Soviet bases for shuttle-bombing missions, so on 4 October 1944 General Spaatz sent a message to Eastern Command ending the operational portion of FRANTIC. Operation FRANTIC didn't see its objectives fulfilled. In order to pull the events we've covered on FRANTIC together, let's summarize the events.

14. Operation FRANTIC is interesting to look into, and there is plenty of information about it. As we recap, remember, I've only covered the tip of the ice berg—there's more to be uncovered. I focused on the front end of the operation to include working the political deals and operational preparations. Specifically, we talked about the initial reasons for FRANTIC focusing on its roots

in the AWPD-1 which called for over 3000 heavy bombers to hit "vital targets" in Eastern Europe using bases in the UK, the Middle East, Iceland, and the Soviet Union. The Americans also hoped to soften the Soviets' position on American use of bases in Siberia for war efforts in the Far East. We then discussed the meeting in Moscow where General Dean offered Soviet General Molotov the proposal to use Soviet bases. He agreed "in principle" but didn't relay it to Stalin. Then on to the Teheran Conference where President Roosevelt raised the issue with Stalin who claimed he didn't have time to look at it. We saw how, finally, on 26 December 1944 Stalin agreed to include the proposal in their war plans, so operational preparations were ready to begin. Operational objectives were next with a comparison of higher command level objectives and 15th AF objectives. USSTAFE objectives were "big picture" objectives whereas 15th AF was looking at specific targets like oil and fuel dumps. Then we covered specific operational plans—the who, what, where, and when. We saw that 15th AF would conduct the initial mission on 2 June 1944, and 8th AF would join after 15 June. We learned 15th AF's 5th Wing tasked four of its bomber groups, 99th, 97th, 2nd, and 483rd, to participate in the first mission. The 306th Fighter Wing's 325th Fighter Group would provided escort. Moving along to personnel issues we concentrated first on specific career fields required (both air and ground crews) and factors involved in American troop movements to Soviet bases. Personnel in maintenance made up the bulk of ground crews and gunners were used on board the bombers for defense. The Soviets dragged their feet on approving group visas for entry into their country. Then we considered the first mission on 2 Jun 1944 bombing targets in Debreczen, Hungary with only one aircraft lost but several enlisted aircrew members were on board. The impressive approach and landing at Poltava, one of the Soviet bases, was next and the great impression the American airmen made

on the press and the Soviets. Finally, we examined summer bombing, staffing , and humanitarian efforts concluding with the discontinuance of the operation. American/Soviet friction over Warsaw humanitarian efforts and lack of interest on the Soviets' part caused General Spaatz to call off Operation FRANTIC on 4 October 1944. Operation FRANTIC is an important part of our American history even if it was considered a failure. Those who are members of the US Air Force will ultimately benefit from FRANTIC if they learn more about it, take its mistakes and avoid them in the future.

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