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# The Round Tablette

*Founding Editor: James W. Gerber, MD (1951–2009)*

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## Welcome to the first October session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table.

Tonight's speaker is James Scott, author of *Black Snow*, who will discuss General Curtis LeMay's bombing strategy against Japan that led to the dropping of the atomic bomb.

Few people could comprehend the immense distances of the Pacific Theater. Thirty-eight hundred miles separated Honolulu from Tokyo, a distance greater than that from New York to Paris. The Pacific Theater necessitated long-range bombing missions conducted by the Army Air Forces (AAF) and by naval aviators flying off aircraft carriers. Aviators spent hours in their planes even to reach their targets. Americans needed to develop a plane that would reach Japan, and they did with the B-29.

Having a 141 foot wingspan and ninety-nine foot length, the B-29, or "B-san" as the Japanese called it, inspired a sense of awe. The very heavy bomber or "Superfortress" could reach a top speed of 390 miles per hour and had a 3,200 mile combat range. The silvery streamlined shape included pressurized crew spaces and remote-controlled gun turrets. Despite the technological innovations, the B-29 had its problems. Its four Wright Cyclone engines, with eighteen cylinders producing 2,200 horsepower (compared with the B-17's nine-cylinder engines and 1,200 horsepower), created cooling problems and were a fire hazard. The problems were ignored and the "B-san" was rushed into production and made its war debut as an immature weapons system.

The Superfortresses began their war service in the China-Burma-India Theater (CBI), from bases in India, in April 1944. Aircraft were flown from Kansas, to Newfoundland, to Morocco, to Cairo, onto Karachi and then to Calcutta. Assigned to the XX Bomber Command, they were part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Air Force, commanded by General Henry "Hap" Arnold, headquartered in Washington D.C. He had pushed for the development of the B-29 and oversaw all operations to keep the air war in the spotlight to create the grounds for an independent postwar US Air Force. While in the CBI, the XX Bomber Command launched forty-nine missions; only nine targeted Japan.

XX Bomber Command's experience in the CBI Theater proved notable primarily because it provided a testing ground for the B-29 and brought Major General Curtis LeMay to the Pacific Theater. Unhappy with the progress of operations in the CBI "Hap" Arnold ordered LeMay to take over. LeMay refused until he learned all he could about the B-29, eventually arriving in India in August 1944.

Operations in the CBI met with only moderate success, until the "island hopping" strategy took Pacific islands held by the Japanese Empire. Once the islands of Guam, Saipan, and Tinian were taken, and runways built, B-29 operations moved to the Pacific. Brigadier General Haywood "Possum" Hansell's XXI Bomber Command flew their first Marianas based strike against Japan in November 1944. These operations made aviation history as the B-29s routinely flew 1,500 transoceanic miles to make their bombing runs – in a 15-hour round trip.

Hansell's superiors worried that he lacked the right personality for air combat command (based on his performance commanding the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Wing in Europe), and he was among the minority of air staff officers who opposed firebombing – as both morally objectionable and militarily unnecessary. He also had problems with his subordinates who advocated for a more aggressive approach; many of his cautionary measures increased efficiency but lowered morale; and he was the junior AAF general officer in theater and in 20<sup>th</sup> AF.

The post-war bombing assessment found Hansell's emphasis on precision daylight bombing more successful than first thought. He worked with the Navy to develop a working air-sea rescue program that saved half of all B-29 crews downed over water. Despite this, "Hap" and his deputy, Maj. Gen. Lauris Norstad were unhappy, both with Hansell, and because the high aircraft loss rate – on every major mission a Superfortress was lost with 11 crewmen, with a cost of over \$600,000 per craft. On 6 January 1945, Norstad abruptly relieved Hansell, and replaced him with Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay.

Under LeMay, the XXI Bomber Command (later joined by the XX Bomber Command which transferred from the CBI Theater), continued to bomb Japan and efficiency improved. In March 1945, LeMay shifted from using demolition bombs to incendiary bombs. Napalm, the most effective incendiary weapon, used aluminum salts of naphthenic and palmitic acids to produce a thickening agent to gasoline. Having the consistency of

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applesauce, it clung to anything it touched and burned at high intensities. Designed to break apart at about 2,000 feet, incendiary bombs spewed napalm over a wide area before ignition. Used first in the European Theater, these bombs proved more effective in Japan where the majority of the buildings were made of wood. The 10 March 1945 firebombing of Tokyo destroyed sixteen square miles of the city and tens of thousands of people lost their lives. The bombers had found a new weapon for their arsenal.

The final piece in the US aviation arsenal, that ultimately broke the back of the Japanese will, was delivered on 6 August 1945. Colonel Paul Tibbitt piloted a B-29 (the *Enola Gay*) over Hiroshima, dropping the first atomic bomb. A second bomb was dropped three days later on Nagasaki. After this, Emperor Hirohito overruled his military cabinet and in a radio broadcast announced surrender.

While many argue over the effectiveness of air power in ending the war, senior civilian leaders in Japan acknowledge that the combination of prolonged bombing by the B-29s, the atomic bombs, and the Soviet invasion of Manchuria brought about the Empire's capitulation.

#### FURTHER READINGS:

James M. Scott, *Black Snow: Curtis LeMay, the Firebombing of Tokyo, and the Road to the Atomic Bomb*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2022)

Conrad C. Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in World War II: Bombs, Cities, Civilians, and Oil* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2016).

Barrett Tillman, *Whirlwind: The Air War against Japan, 1942-1945* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010)

Herman Knell, *To Destroy a City: Strategic Bombing and its Human Consequences in World War II* (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 2003)

US Strategic Bombing Survey, [Summary Report \(Pacific War\)](#), (USGPO, 1946).

#### Announcements:

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table – 17 Oct. 2023, *Gen. Grenville Dodge, Grant's Intelligence officer* – [www.tccwrt.com](http://www.tccwrt.com) – [info@tccwrt.com](mailto:info@tccwrt.com)  
Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345 - 320-616-6050 -

<http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>.

8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, 2<sup>nd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesdays at 1100 - <https://www.8thmn.org>.

Friends of Ft. Snelling - [www.fortsnelling.org](http://www.fortsnelling.org)

Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN - Air show – TBA - 320-564-6644 -

<http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.

Wings of the North Airshow - Eden Prairie –TBA July 2024 - Flying Cloud Airport - 952-746-6100 - [www.wotn.org](http://www.wotn.org)

Alliance Française 612-332-0436 -

[www.afmisp.org](http://www.afmisp.org)

Friends of the **National WW II Memorial** –

<http://www.wwiimemorialfriends.org>.

Pittsburg Veterans Breakfast Club

- <http://www.vbcphg.org>.

Western Naval Historical Association

[info@wnha.net](mailto:info@wnha.net)

CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 -

[www.cafmn.org](http://www.cafmn.org)

Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 -

[crazyjerry45@hotmail.com](mailto:crazyjerry45@hotmail.com)

**We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or [coldpatton@yahoo.com](mailto:coldpatton@yahoo.com)**

#### Round Table Schedule 2023-2024

**2023**

24 Oct. 3<sup>rd</sup> Inf. Division Campaigns

**15 Nov. Wed.** Nazi Propaganda

12 Dec. Pearl Harbor – Air Battles

**2024**

9 Jan. Casablanca Conference

13 Feb. 99<sup>th</sup> “Viking” Battalion

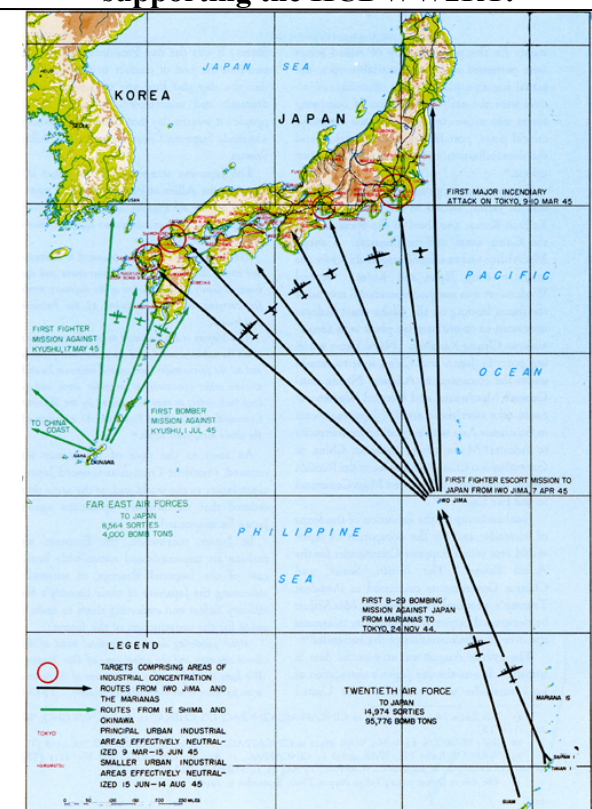
12 Mar. Selling the War – Bill Maudlin

26 Mar. Coast Watchers: Hawaii, England

9 Apr. War of Supply–Mediterranean

14 May Dieppe's Lessons for Normandy

**The Round Table is a 501.c.3 non-profit. We would greatly appreciate your supporting the HCDWW2RT.**



**Aerial Bombing of Japan**

Plate 130, *Reports of General MacArthur* (1950)



**Bomb damage in Osaka, Japan**

[Library of Congress](#)