

The Loneliness of Command

Experts called the mission impossible. One man, with the courage of his convictions, knew it could be done.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

MANY A heroic deed has been done in the heat of battle, when adrenaline flows and there is no time to count the cost. Another, seldom recognized, kind of valor lies in deliberate, measured decisions made for high stakes, without the support of superiors or subordinates, and with the cost of failure almost incalculable. Such is the loneliness of command.

Brig. Gen. (later Maj. Gen.) Haywood S. "Possum" Hansell, newly appointed commander of XXI Bomber Command and a former Eighth Air Force bombardment leader, flew the first B-29 into Isley Field, Saipan, in early October 1944. XXI Bomber Command was the major element of Twentieth Air Force, headed by Gen. H. H. Arnold and reporting directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. General Arnold had insisted on that arrangement to avoid having the AAF's B-29 force parceled out to theater commanders and thus diverted from the strategic campaign, as had happened in Europe.

Primary targets assigned to XXI Bomber Command were Japanese aircraft and engine factories in order to win air superiority, pave the way for destruction of the enemy's war economy, and, it was hoped by airmen, defeat Japan without a bloody invasion. Hitting those targets required precision daylight bombing conducted in large, high-altitude formations.

The operational problems confronting Possum Hansell were enormous. Only one of the two fields on Saipan was ready, and only marginally. The B-29 bases at Tinian

and Guam were not yet completed. The B-29 was still having engine problems. Hansell's crews averaged fewer than 100 hours of experience in the Superfort and fewer than twelve hours of formation time. The bombers, designed for a takeoff weight of 120,000 pounds, would be lifting off, heavy with fuel, at 140,000 pounds. They would fly for the first time in large formations, which eats up fuel, and would be operating at the extreme limit of their range. Iwo Jima had not been taken, so there would be no fighter escort and no emergency landing field between Japan and Saipan.

Despite all this, General Hansell was determined to fulfill the AAF's promise to the JCS that the B-29 assault on Japan would begin in November against the top-priority targets that demanded precision daylight bombing. He was also determined to lead the first strike, SAN ANTONIO I, since many 73d Bomb Wing crews did not share his conviction—based on tests he had run while Chief of Staff of Twentieth Air Force—that B-29s in formation had enough range to do the job.

General Arnold reviewed the plan of attack and immediately ordered Hansell, who was privy to JCS strategic plans and who knew that the Japanese code had been broken, to

stay on the ground. Arnold also advised Hansell that his experts in Washington said the mission couldn't be flown as planned, and that unescorted B-29s would be sitting ducks for Japanese fighters. Arnold did not cancel the mission, nor would he approve it. He left the decision to Hansell. Then, the 73d Bomb Wing commander, who subsequently led the mission, advised Hansell in writing that he shared Arnold's view. He recommended substituting night sorties against urban area targets, flown by individual planes or small formations.

If Hansell cleared the mission in spite of these warnings and was wrong, he would be putting at risk ninety percent of the B-29 force then in the Pacific, more than 1,000 lives, the strategic air campaign against Japan as then envisioned, and perhaps the future of the Air Force as an independent service. His own distinguished career would end in disgrace. He made the decision to go.

On November 24, 1944, 111 B-29s roared down Isley Field's one runway for a formation attack on targets in the Tokyo area. Eighty-eight hit either primary or secondary targets, twenty-three turned back safely because of fuel or mechanical problems, one B-29 was lost in combat, and one to unknown causes.

From that day on, the B-29 assault on Japan gathered momentum, leading to Japan's surrender without invasion on August 10, 1945. Before the surrender, the strategic air campaign had shifted emphasis from daylight precision attacks to night area bombing, but for reasons not associated with B-29 capabilities or the desirability of precision bombing.

Valor has many faces, among them Brig. Gen. Haywood S. Hansell's lonely, courageous decision to launch the strike that was the beginning of the end of World War II, and the final vindication of strategic air warfare. ■



General Hansell briefs XXI Bomber Command for the first B-29 raid from Saipan.