

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

Project Aphrodite

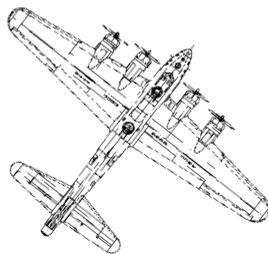
In mid-1944, AAF moved to checkmate a potentially disastrous German threat to the UK and perhaps even to the US.

OPERATION Crossbow, the Allied bombing campaign against German V-weapon launching sites in northwest France, held top priority in early 1944. Despite hundreds of strikes against these sites, German attacks with V-1 buzz bombs against urban targets in the United Kingdom began in June 1944 and soon resulted in extensive loss of life and great property damage. It was known that the Germans were working on a supersonic guided missile, the V-2, which was believed by many to be technically infeasible at that time. But surprise. The first V-2 hit the London area in September of that year, with 800 to follow.

In the V-weapon launching area, a number of very different large sites were under construction—their walls 12- to 14-foot thick and with massive steel doors. Were they intended to launch V-2s, or perhaps a rumored V-3, a missile with the range to hit targets in the eastern US? The Germans were striving to develop nuclear weapons, though progress in that area was not known. At any rate, the possibility of an operational V-2, or perhaps a nuclear-armed V-3, was not a threat to be taken lightly. These mysterious, heavily defended sites were attacked at night by the Royal Air Force, using 12,000-pound Tall-boy bombs, and during the day, by Eighth Air Force. Damage was minimal. A solution had to be found.

It was concluded that the most vulnerable element of the structures was their steel doors, which were virtually immune to damage by high-altitude bombing. Tactical fighters coming in at low altitude did not have the punch to do the job. Gen. Carl A. "Tooney" Spaatz and his scientific, technical, and operational advisors came up with a novel idea. Why not use war-weary B-17s as guided missiles? That would call for more than a few innovations.

The plan, labeled Project Aphrodite, was tested inconclusively at Air Proving Command in Florida. Essentially, the idea was that a completely stripped-down and explosive-laden B-17 with a crew of two—a pilot and an autopilot technician—would take off from a base in the UK. Once safely in the air, control of the B-17 would be turned over to a mother ship cruising at 20,000 feet,



whose crew would fly it by radio signals fed into the B-17's autopilot. The B-17 crew would bail out over England. The mother ship then would fly the bomber, at an altitude of 200 to 400 feet, to the target and dive it into the steel doors. This, of course, was not an "any day" operation. Ceiling-and-visibility-unlimited weather was essential so that the mother ship's crew could follow the progress of its charge.

Crews for the 10 modified B-17s were volunteers from bomb groups of the Eighth Air Force 3d Division. Each B-17 had been stripped of everything but a pilot's seat and loaded with 22,000 pounds of RDX, the most powerful explosive available. The war-weary bombers were given new engines and beefed-up landing gear, since they would be about 5,000 pounds over designed gross weight. The boxes were connected and fused so the load would detonate simultaneously.

On August 4, the weather was good enough to launch the first two B-17 flying bombs. The first to go was piloted by Lt. Fain Pool with autopilot technician SSgt. Philip Enterline. They had to enter and leave the aircraft through the navigator's escape hatch, the only

entrance not sealed. After making sure the controls operated properly on radio signals, Enterline bailed out at 1,200 feet. Pool followed at a much lower altitude after he had armed the load. When he landed, several British civilians came up to inquire what had happened. Since Aphrodite was highly classified, he told them his plane was on fire, forcing him to use his parachute. Almost immediately they heard a terrific explosion, caused not by Pool's aircraft but by the second B-17 flying bomb. Its elevator control had malfunctioned, causing the plane to stall and crash before the pilot, Lt. John Fisher, could get out. Pool's plane made it to the target under radio control but on its second pass was shot down by ground fire. The crews of two other modified B-17s that were launched that day survived, but neither reached its target.

Never wanting to be far behind the Air Force, the Navy adopted the Aphrodite technique, using its version of the B-24, but with two pilots who also were to bail out over England, while their aircraft was to proceed under radio control to submarine pens at Heligoland, Germany. The first pilot was Navy Lt. Joseph Kennedy, Jr., older brother of John F. Kennedy, thirty-fifth US President. His copilot was Lt. Bud Willy. While still over England, the aircraft exploded, killing both men.

No aircraft subsequently launched under Project Aphrodite or its Navy counterpart hit its target. As the Germans retreated in the weeks after D-Day, the large sites in France no longer were within their reach, and the project was abandoned. Despite its lack of success, Aphrodite was a daring, imaginative undertaking that might be considered a first, short step toward the development of American guided missiles. The crews that volunteered for these missions were stepping into an unprecedented, but dangerous, venture. For each of them, it was an act of exceptional valor. ■

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