

Carpetbagger Museum Harrington, Northamptonshire (GB)

OPERATION CARPETBAGGER

The 801st / 492nd Bomb Group



The purpose of the Carpetbagger project was to fly "Special Operations" to deliver supplies to resistance groups in enemy occupied countries; to deliver personnel called "JOEs" to the field (BCRA, Jedburghs, OSS, Proust, SOE, Sussex) and occasionally to bring back personnel from the field.

To avoid action with the enemy flights were ordinarily made at night and at low level. Thus the altitude attained seldom exceeded 7,000 feet. When it was necessary for an aircraft to cross enemy held areas equipped with anti-aircraft defences, a route was chosen which would expose the aircraft to the fire of light guns only. A low altitude made it more difficult for the enemy to detect the aircraft either by sound or by radar detection devices. Obstacles on the ground distort the sound of a low flying aircraft far more than they do the noise of a high flying one, because of the sharper angles of sound reflection. Radar and sound detection devices had less time in which to focus on a low flying aeroplane, and the range of effective detection was shorter at low altitudes.

Combat with the enemy was avoided as it only endangered the success of the mission. Enemy anti aircraft installations and detector posts were skirted as widely as possible in order not to reveal the presence or destination of a Carpetbagger aircraft. As soon as a dangerous area was passed the aeroplane dropped down to 2,000 feet or lower.

CARPETBAGGER operations from the United Kingdom fell into two periods.

Beginning in January 1944 the USAAF delivered supplies to resistance groups in France, Belgium and Holland. Most of the sorties were flown to support patriots in northern France.

The first period of CARPETBAGGER missions ended in September 1944, after which there was a lull of three months, followed by small scale activity until the last two months of the war in Europe.

The second period was characterised by an increase in the percentage of sorties flown to Denmark and Norway, two countries that had received only a small quantity of supplies in comparison with those delivered to France.

The Maquis of Haute Savoie and other mountainous areas were supplied from the Mediterranean theatre until after the Normandy invasion; then large numbers of Eighth Air Force bombers were diverted from strategic missions to make a series of mass drops. Bombers on shuttle missions that terminated at Russian bases also dropped a small quantity of supplies to the defenders of Warsaw, but most of the missions to Poland were carried out by RAF and Polish planes.

Between January and September 1944 the 801st / 492nd Bomb Group undertook 2263 separate missions of which, due to various circumstances, 1577 (ie 69%) were completed satisfactorily.

The successful missions delivered to Occupied Europe were:

- 662 "Joes" (agents);
- 18,535 containers of supplies;
- 8050 "Nickles" (bundles of 4,000 propaganda leaflets);
- 10,725 packages of supplies;
- 26 pigeons (for messages, not eating);
- carried 437 passengers

OPERATIONAL CYCLE OF CARPETBAGGER MISSIONS

The following events at Harrington for thirty six hours provides a good picture of the Carpetbagger operational process.

Targets Received and Plotted

This process begins at 1700 hours, at which time the Conference Room at Air Operations Headquarters, OSS, in London, via the scrambler telephone gives S-2 (the intelligence officer at Harrington) the list of approved targets for the following night. The targets are designated by names and numbers (eg Wheelwright 11, Mixer 7) which refer to targets kept on file and described in detail on Air Transport Forms No 6.

During the evening, S-2 plots these targets on a large operational map covering a wall of the office of the Deputy Group Commander. The map is in a scale of 1 to 500,000, or about ten miles to the inch. It shows topographical features, such as elevations, rivers and forests. Any areas where Special Operation flights are prohibited are clearly indicated on the map.



Col Heflin studies operational map

When a target is plotted, it is indicated by a tab pinned to the map. The comparative priority of the missions is shown by bits of coloured paper attached to the pins.

British or Special Operations Executive targets proposed for the same night are also plotted with distinctive tabs.

Night's Targets Laid On

At about 0900 hours the following morning, the Station Weather Officer advises the Commanding Officer, or his deputy, of weather conditions anticipated in the target areas, and at that time it is decided where it will be practicable to send Carpetbagger aircraft.

Then the Commanding Officer, or his deputy, selects the list of targets for the night, considering the priority of requests for material in the field, the reception record of the particular ground, the possibilities of enemy opposition, the distribution of desired missions and the availability of aircraft and crews.

The list of selected missions is then telephoned to the London Conference Room by the Intelligence Officer and if London has no practical changes to suggest, the list is in effect for that night's operations.

Targets Assigned to Squadrons

At about 1100 hours, the Squadron Commanders are called in and meet before the map in the Group Operations Room with the tabs pinpointing the targets for the night.

Together, the squadron leaders select targets for their crews, balancing the difficult with the comparatively easy, the distant with the near, so that each squadron finally will have about the same work load.

Any disagreement arising among the squadron commanders is decided by the toss of a coin; or, the Commanding Officer may be called upon to make the decision.

Navigators Receive Targets

At about 1200 hours, the navigators of the crews receive their targets from the Squadron Navigator, who has received his list from the Group Navigator, who has been advised of the targets by S-2 Intelligence Officer.

In the meantime, S-2 officers have been gathering briefing data, and preparing maps and special instructions.

At 1500 hours, each crew navigator turns in a flight plan to his Squadron Navigator, who brings all his squadron flight plans to the Group Navigator. The flight plans and courses are checked by the Group and Squadron Navigators, and if necessary, changes are made. A take-off time schedule is made up by the Group Navigator, who is an assistant S-3 Operations Officer.

The take-off time schedule is posted and distributed to Squadron S-3's.

S-2 Brief Crews

Also at about 1500 hours, S-2 Officers begin meeting with officer members of each crew.

Crew maps are checked for location of the target (latitude, longitude and terrain features). The S-2 Officers use large scale maps, 1 to 500,000 or 1 to 80,000, to ensure accuracy. Their maps are called target maps and are on a scale of 1 to 250,000 or about five miles to an inch.

Each crew is briefed separately by an S-2 Officer and has the opportunity to study the S-2 map and to compare it with their own map.

Final Briefing

At 1630 hours, a final briefing session is held for all crew members in the Nissen hut briefing room alongside the Group Operations Building.

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A weather officer displays the weather map and gives a complete explanation of conditions for each target area, stressing expectations en route and at the home base on the return flight. Weather predictions cover direction and velocity of winds, cloud conditions, icing conditions, the likelihood of rain, sleet or snow.

Then, the Intelligence Officer gives any special information which may affect the crew.

Next the Deputy Commander gives general flying and dropping instructions.

Finally the Group Navigator gives instructions on the route to be followed whilst over England and the point and altitude for crossing the English coast. He ends up by giving the men a 'time check', on which all crew watches are synchronised.

During the afternoon, enlisted crew members are briefed as necessary. The crew navigator briefs them on the course, the type of reception signal, the code recognition letters for the target, and the terrain features approaching and around the target.

Plotting targets

The crew navigators plot their targets on the maps they will use on their mission, check the presence of flak from the S-2 flak maps, select routes and check points en route to their target.

The crew navigator does this under the direction of his Squadron Navigator, using the Intelligence library as needed.



Navigators plotting their proposed courses

Dispatchers, when the aircraft carries special packages or personnel to be dropped, are briefed by the Group Armament Officer, who is the Chief Dispatcher for the Group.

Loading the Aircraft

As soon as it is ready, the target list goes to the OSS Liaison Officer at Harrington, so that he can draw up a list of required containers and packages for which he arranges delivery to the air drome.

The containers are consigned to the Group Ordnance Officer, whose men deliver the containers, first snapping on parachutes, to the aircraft where Armament Section men stand ready to load the containers into the aircraft.

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Handling containers at their storage area near the bomb dump store



Containers being loaded into the bomb bay of the B-24



Containers, with parachute packs attached, are stored in the bomb racks within the B-24 aircraft

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The packages are delivered to the Armament Officer of the Group and are taken to the aircraft for loading. The OSS Liaison Officer and his men check each aircraft to ensure that the proper loading is in place.



Loading the B-24 aircraft with packages through the waist gun hatch (gun not fitted)

Leaflets or 'Nickels' are handled by the Armament Section, who deliver them to the aircraft in bundles of 4,000, as received from the Cheddington warehouse of OWI/PWE, operating under the direction of SHAEF. Usually six to ten bundles of leaflets are loaded according to the stock on hand, the length of flight and the time over enemy territory. For new areas, not previously well covered by leaflets, more leaflets will be despatched if possible. (No leaflets are dropped near targets, for security reasons.)

Pre-flight inspection

During the day, as they have an opportunity, crews give their aircraft a pre flight inspection: A half hour test flight is made with each aircraft scheduled for the mission, in order to test all the equipment.



A quick engine check

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Preparation for Take-off

About three hours before the first scheduled take-off, Group Operations telephone the flight plans of all aircraft to the Movement Liaison Officer of the Aircraft Movement Control Section of the Air Defences of Great Britain Command. This includes the 'RT', which is the squadron callsign and the aircraft letter for recognition (eg Reachforth S- Sugar), the times of crossing the English and enemy coasts and the proposed landing times.

Crews have a meal approximately two and a half hours before take-off time, and arrive at their crew rooms, located in Squadron Operations, about two hours before the take-off.

The navigator then receives up to the minute weather reports on a weather card, and turns in a revised flight plan and estimated time of arrival to the Squadron S-3.

The pilot receives and distributes to his crew kits furnished by S-2 and containing rations of candy and chewing gum, flares, purses and emergency packets.

The radio operator receives his 'flimsy'. The 'flimsy' details all signals information including the code letters, the ground challenge and reply letter, and the colours of the day for flare signals over England, the navigational radio beacons, direction finder stations in England, a list of the airdrome signals for England and other navigational information, including the night's bomber code used in communications between bombers and home stations. If necessary, the Group Communications Officer briefs radio operators on special information and the navigator his 'GEE' codes.

It is now about forty five minutes before take-off time, and the crew is driven out to where their B24 aircraft is parked.

Joes' arrival

Personnel to be dropped are received at Harrington by the Armament Officer and are controlled by his section until loaded on the aircraft. Representatives from 'Special Operations', London, escort all agents until they are loaded, supervise their dressing and assist in their briefing for the drop.



Arrival of "Joes" at Harrington airfield

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Joels getting dressed ready to be loaded aboard aircraft

Take - Off

The aircraft are now ready for the night's missions. The crews warm up their aircraft and take off on schedule, proceeding individually to their targets. As each aircraft takes off, the Flying Control Section checks it out and reports this take off to Group Operations who telephones the information to the Movement Liaison Officers of the Air Defences of Great Britain Command at Stanmore.



B-24 taking off from west - east runway

After leaving the target thirty to fifty miles behind, the dispatcher drops the leaflets on villages and towns passed over on the homeward flight).

The flight

The majority of Carpetbagger flights were made during the moon period, or on those nights when the moon was out, making the ground visible to the navigator and bombardier

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Non moon period flights at night were made with the use of special navigation equipment: "Rebecca/Eureka". The "Rebecca/Eureka" directional system consisted of a ground beacon (*Eureka*) set up on the drop zone, this was triggered by a signal from *Rebecca* set in the aircraft. *Eureka* then automatically sent out signals which were picked up by a calibrated receiver, this indicated the aircraft's position in relation to the drop zone. By means of this equipment, the percentage of accuracy could be even greater than with ordinary visual pilotage, but reception parties had to have the ground counterparts of the S- Phone and Rebecca equipment and be able to use them expertly - something which was very difficult in territory occupied by the enemy. Thus, even in the dark periods, aircraft could fly low altitudes with only a slight increase in risk.

The most important flying instrument was a radio altimeter giving an accurate height readout on the low level flights.

However dark period operations were possible without S-Phone or Rebecca provided that the reception signals consisted of bonfires and provided there could be reference to prominent land marks which could be distinguished accurately in the dark, such as large rivers and lakes.

Above the target

When the aircraft reached a position a few miles from the drop zone, the 'S' Phone was used. This two way radio was invented by the SOE radio section and proved to be remarkably efficient - it gave a signal in the form of an upward cone and was virtually immune to enemy interception.

In order that accurate drops may be made, pilots endeavoured to get down to within 400 to 600 feet of the ground and to reduce their flying speed to 130 miles per hour or less. The low speed reduced the chances of damage to parachutes, as the shock of opening is much less at the slower speed.

JOEs were normally dropped from a height of 600 ft.

After leaving the target thirty to fifty miles behind, the dispatcher drops the leaflets on villages and towns passed over on the homeward flight).

Interrogation of Crews

When an aircraft has completed its mission and returned to the home base, its crew are driven directly to the Intelligence Library situated at the rear of the Group Operations Building, for interrogation by S-2 Officers.

The interrogation finds the crew showing the stress of a hard dangerous mission which has lasted from five to eight hours. Free, frank interchange of information is encouraged. The S-2 Officers handle the jumpy crew with a great deal of tact and flexibility...



Capt Sullivan S2 at Harrington debriefs crew

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End of the mission

After the interrogation, the crew go to the Mess Hall, where under the supervision of a medical officer, each man is given a two ounce medicinal ration of whiskey. The man signs a receipt for his whiskey, which is issued for operational use only and serves to relax tense nerves.



Mess Hall

Then the men get a good breakfast, including fresh eggs, and go to bed. If any man has trouble getting to sleep, he is supposed to ask the Medical Officer for a sedative.

The operational cycle ends as the men return to their billets for a well deserved rest.