

Proving the Four-Engine Bomber: Intercepting the SS Rex

By: Dr. William Pace Head, 78 ABW Chief Historian



Paths to the Present
FLASHBACK

On 12 May 1938 three Army Air Corps Boeing B-17 *Flying Fortresses*, attempting to prove the value of four-engine bombers, simulated the interception of the Italian passenger liner *SS Rex*, 620 miles at sea. They believed the mission would demonstrate the feasibility of using long-range bombers for coastal defense, thus convincing War Department leaders and Congress to build more than the thirteen then in existence. At 0830 hours, the three B-17s prepared to launch in a rain squall even as a morning position report from *Rex* was relayed to lead navigator 1st Lieutenant Curtis LeMay. It indicated that the luxury liner was then 725 nautical miles from New York Harbor, farther east than his original computations indicated. LeMay's original flight plan had incorporated an area search, if necessary, but weather conditions and the ship's distance from Long Island precluded that possibility.

With Col. Robert Olds, commander of the 2nd Bomb Group at Langley Field, Virginia, acting as the mission commander, and Major Caleb V. Haynes as lead pilot on B-17 number 80, the bomber flight took off from Mitchel Field, New York at 0845 hours and flew east from Sandy

Hook at 170 mph on a true course of 101 degrees through rain, hail, downdrafts, and an intense headwind that reduced their ground speed by 11.5 mph. The other two bombers were



Col Robert Olds



Curtis E. LeMay
USAF Museum Photo Archives

Lt Curtis LeMay

Aircraft 81 piloted by Major Cornelius W. Cousland with co-pilot Maj Gen George W. Goddard – Chief of the Materiel Division's Photographic Section who documented the mission using a modified Graflex camera – and 82 flown by Capt. Archibald Y. Smith. Number 80 carried a NBC radio crew scheduled to broadcast the event. Number 81 carried a reporter from the *New York Herald Tribune* and number 82 one from the *New York Times*.

LeMay was unable to check the effect of the winds on ground speed and drift because of a heavy overcast that limited their altitude to 1,100 feet. At 1000 hours they emerged into good weather that only lasted an hour. LeMay took double drifts until the B-17s had to maneuver to transit a cold front. At 1115 hours they reassembled in clear weather on the other side, where LeMay checked their course again. He calculated an intercept time of 1225 hours for Olds, who in turn passed it to Major Vincent

L. Meloy in order to schedule the live radio broadcast. At noon the B-17s encountered an area of scattered rain squalls. They spread into a line abreast formation with the aircraft 15 nautical miles apart to increase their chances of spotting the *Rex*.

At 1223 hours, the bombers broke out of the squall line, and Cousland, in No. 81, instantly sighted the *Rex*. "There it is! There it is!" he yelled into his radio to the other pilots, "81 to 80, twelve o'clock." Two minutes later, just as predicted, the B-17s flew by the *Rex* while it was 620 miles east of Sandy Hook. The aircraft reversed course and came up on the ship's port side, with No. 82 flying wing on No. 80 at smoke stack level. From the co-pilot's seat of No. 81, Major George Goddard took a series of photographs with his Graflex camera. In the waist position of No. 80, Meloy made voice contact with the ship's captain, who invited "all members of the flight to come down to lunch." The ship's passengers filled the decks, waving to the bombers, with a group of Americans purportedly singing the *Star Spangled Banner*.



Majors Vincent L. Meloy (center) and Caleb V. Haynes (right) during the 1938 goodwill visit to Bogota, Colombia

Because of the bad weather, the B-17s returned individually to Mitchel Field. Cousland's Flying Fortress encountered severe hail, damaging all the forward surfaces of the plane, with ice causing a temporary shutdown of one engine. As a result, Cousland lagged behind the others, landing at 1630 hours. The next morning the three bombers took off to return to Harrisburg and spotted the *Rex* passing the Statue of Liberty at 0930 hours as it entered New York Harbor.

The airmen's elation at their accomplishment was short lived. In the immediate aftermath, short-sighted and jealous Army and Navy leaders, tied to outdated notions of U.S. military policy and fearful they might lose funding from Congress, convinced the War Department to limit further expansion of the Air Corps as well as its roles and missions. However, this reactionary manifestation did not last, for airmen had an important ally. In January 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, very much aware of the threats in Europe from German airpower and cognizant of the impact such missions had on public opinion, issued a public statement calling for an expansion of the Air Corps in anticipation



SS Rex intercepted by B-17s

of the need for modern weapons in case of another world war. While for the time being, he stopped short of calling for a full scale military buildup, he advocated that America protect her own shores and the rest of the Western Hemisphere. From this point on everything changed. The new Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, at the behest of the White House, sought to bolster the Air Corps. To do so, Marshall accepted advice from senior airmen like Air Corps Chief of Staff General

Henry H. Arnold, General Frank Andrews, commander of General Headquarters Air Force, and General A.W. Robins, Chief of Materiel Division.

During the next several months Congress appropriated funds to train hundreds of new pilots and air crews as well as build new aircraft like the B-17. When war did come on 7 December 1941, America was at least capable of defending herself until her mighty industry would fill the skies with the weapons needed to take the war to her enemies.

Ultimately, missions like the interception of the *Rex* bore important fruit, publically proving that the fledgling Air Corps was a major component of coastal and national defense. More important, it had also convinced many important leaders, like FDR, that heavy four-engine bombers were crucial to winning any future wars. The mission also validated the efficacy of the B-17 to seek and find a target. This would prove vital in the decisive days of daylight bombing raids over World War II Europe. The B-17s and her sister bombers would prove essential to victory. Last, but not least, it eventually kick-started the careers of those involved; especially young Curt LeMay. By the end of the war, General LeMay would lead the 20th Air Force to victory in Japan.

The success of the *Rex* mission has not been forgotten. On 24 August 2007, three B-52s from the 2nd Bomb Wing, successors to the unit which flew the 1938 mission, effected "Operation Rex Redux." Flying out of Barksdale AFB,



Louisiana, crew members executed a formal training mission to test a new targeting system and commemorate the interception of the *Rex*. Employing the call signs Rex 51, Rex 52, and Rex 53, they intercepted the Military Sealift Command vessel *MV Second Lieutenant John P. Bobo*, just east of Bermuda. As in 1938, they proved the vital nature of U.S. airpower.

2nd Bomb Wing commander's B-52H

Further Reading:

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4225 Logistics Ave., RM S133 • Wright-Patterson AFB 45433-5006 • DSN: 713-1797 • Comm: (937) 713-1797

For general inquiries, archives, and/or research questions, contact: R. Ray Ortensie

For heritage and exhibit questions, contact: Jack Waid

HQAFMC.HO@us.af.mil