Rendezvous With the *Rex*

They bucked storm after storm, and turbulence tossed them around, but the lead navigator was Curtis LeMay.

By John T. Correll

In May 1938, the Air Corps staged the most extensive maneuvers in its history up to then. Maj. Gen. Frank M. Andrews was in charge of the exercise. He established his headquarters at Mitchel Field on Long Island.

Andrews was commander of General Headquarters Air Force, to which the field forces of the Air Corps were assigned. For the wargames, he had pulled together 187 combat airplanes and thousands of airmen from all three wings of GHQ Air Force. The aircraft were deployed to 19 airports in the northeastern United States, from Schenectady, N.Y., and Aberdeen, Md., westward to Harrisburg, Pa.

Taking part were twin-engine B-18 bombers, P-36 fighters (still called "pursuits" in 1938), and A-17 attack aircraft, but the star of the show was the B-17 Flying Fortress. The Air Corps had only 13 of these new Boeing-made four-engine bombers, and Col. Robert Olds, commander of the 2nd Bomb Group at Langley Field, Va., had brought nine of them to the maneuvers. They were parked on the ramp at the Harrisburg municipal airport.

Facing page: Two B-17s, having spotted the Italian liner* Rex *in the Atlantic, move into position to simulate an attack. Left: Maj. Ira Eaker (l) in 1936 (shown with Maj. William Kepner). Two years later, Lieutenant Colonel Eaker played a key role in conceiving and publicizing the* Rex *intercept.

The B-17 had not yet taken on the full configuration that would become so familiar in World War II. These first models did not have the graceful dorsal fin or the extended fuselage that housed the tail gun in the wartime B-17s. Nevertheless, they were a big advance over earlier bombers and were of keen interest to the news reporters covering the maneuvers.

The scenario postulated an aggressor—a combination of adversaries from Europe and Asia. Enemy airplanes, warships, and troops would be employed to attack and attempt to capture industrial territory in the northeastern United States. The US Navy would be busy in the Pacific, so GHQ Air Force had to defend the eastern seaboard. A seaborne invasion force was headed for New England.

The scenario called for Air Corps airplanes to find the enemy force at sea before its aircraft carriers could attack, but no US ships were available to play the part of the enemy. The Navy, then conducting its own fleet exercises in the Pacific, was not about to give Andrews any of its ships to use as targets for his B-17s. Without Navy participation, it appeared that GHQ Air Force would have to fly out, simulate the intercept of ships, and fly back.

Then, with the maneuvers already under way, there emerged an opportunity to use an actual ship for the intercept and gain other advantages for the Air Corps as well.

Andrews had borrowed from the Air Staff Lt. Col. Ira C. Eaker, who was chief of its Information Division. Eaker was to serve as G-2 (intelligence) for the maneuvers and to handle the press. Eaker brought with him Reserve 2nd Lt. Harris B. Hull, a reporter for the *Washington Post* who had been called to active duty for the exercise. Hull learned that the Italian cruise liner *Rex* was about 1,000 miles offshore, inbound to New York. He suggested an "intercept" of *Rex* to Eaker, who proposed it to Andrews, who was all for it. It was a splendid opportunity to bring the range and capability of the B-17 to public attention.

Roles and Missions Clash

Italian officials readily agreed to the plan, which would bring free publicity to their steamship line. The War Department approved as well. It soon became apparent that the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Malin Craig, did not fully catch on to what it was all about. Ostensibly, the intercept would exercise GHQ Air Force in its coastal defense role. In actuality, it would demonstrate the capabilities of long-range airpower—and of the new B-17.

Strategic power projection was not an official assigned mission of the Air Corps at the time. In the 1930s, isolationism dominated US foreign policy, and having the ability to conduct armed operations far from US soil was deemed not only unneeded but also unwanted. As a result, Air Corps officers had to use coastal defense and reinforcement of distant possessions as justification for acquiring the long-range bomber.

This, however, generated a persistent Air Corps-Navy roles and mission clash over coastal defense. In 1931, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, Army Chief of Staff, and Adm. William V. Pratt, the Chief of Naval Operations, had agreed that the Air Corps would defend the US coast and that Navy aircraft would defend the sea. No one, however, specified how far from land Air Corps airplanes would operate. The agreement was useful for Pratt, who wanted to free up resources to develop the Navy as an offensive, rather than a defensive, force. After Pratt retired, the new CNO, Adm. William H. Standley, ignored the agreement, and the interservice struggle over the coastal defense mission resumed.

In the 1938 wargames, the *Rex* intercept turned out to be the central event. Olds moved three of his B-17s—No. 80, No. 81, and No. 82—from Harrisburg to Mitchel Field on May 11, the day before the main event.

Olds had chosen for the job the 49th Bombardment Squadron's recognized first team. Maj. Vincent J. Meloy would command a three-ship formation. Capt. Cornelius Cousland would pilot No. 81, and Capt. A. Y. Smith would pilot No. 82. The lead aircraft, however, was No. 80. It was to be piloted by Maj. Caleb V. Haynes. Its lead navigator would be 1st Lt. Curtis E. LeMay.

LeMay was known to be the best navigator in the force. In 1933, already a pilot, he attended the first course in navigation ever conducted for the Air Corps. Only a few dozen officers, all pilots, were so trained. LeMay taught navigation to other airmen while flying as a pursuit pilot in Hawaii before coming to the 2nd Bomb Group at Langley in 1937.

Andrews and Eaker knew perfectly well that this distant intercept of *Rex* would infuriate the admirals. The Navy had not forgotten that Billy Mitchell and the Air Service had, in what the Navy regarded as a publicity stunt, sunk the war surplus battleship *Ostfriesland* in 1921 and cast doubt on the value of the fleet's capital warship.

Furthermore, the Navy was still seething about a joint exercise in August 1937, when B-17s dropped water-filled practice bombs on the battleship *Utah* off the coast of California. That was the first big B-17 exercise, and the same airmen who later would conduct the *Rex* intercept were in the middle of it. The lead airplane was flown by Haynes, and the navigator guiding him to the target was none other than

First Lt. Curtis LeMay

***Brand-new B-17s form up on May 12, 1937. Note aircraft 80 in the rear; exactly one year later, on May 12, 1938, it would carry LeMay and Haynes to their rendezvous with* Rex.**

Curtis LeMay. Both Andrews and Olds were aboard the lead airplane.

Two times during the exercise, the Navy provided false position information for the target ships, explaining the glitch as an honest mistake. Despite that handicap, LeMay found the ships on Aug. 13. The bombers, emerging from the clouds at 400 feet, struck *Utah* with three direct hits, also registering several near misses. On Aug. 14, LeMay again found *Utah;* in this attack, 12 percent of the water bombs, dropped from high altitude, were direct hits.

Upon their return to March Field, Calif., the bomber crew members were met at the flight line and notified that, on orders from Washington, there would be no publicity about the just-completed exercise.

The Navy, having declined to engage in the 1938 GHQ Air Force maneuvers, had no opportunity to put in a fix or stipulate any rules—such as a news media blackout. In fact, the crafty Eaker placed news reporters aboard each of the three B-17s.

The lead B-17 bomber, No. 80, carried not only Haynes and LeMay but also an NBC announcer, two NBC engineers, and their radio transmitter. Mission commander Meloy also flew on that aircraft. Flying with Cousland on No. 81 was C. B. Allen of the *New York Herald Tribune.* Bomber No. 82 had aboard Hanson W. Baldwin of the *New York Times.*

Into the Weather

To document the flight, Eaker had called in the top photo officer in the Air Corps, Maj. George W. Goddard, who came to the exercise from Dayton with his large-format Graflex camera. He flew in the copilot's seat on No. 81. Also aboard No. 81 was Eaker's resourceful Reserve assistant, Lieutenant Hull.

The aircrews arrived at Mitchel Field at midafternoon on May 11. Waiting for them was a radiogram from *Rex,* reporting its position at noon. "If the *Rex* proceeded at normal speed along the regular route from Gilbraltar to New York, she might be about 600 miles or a little more off Sandy Hook by the following noon," LeMay said. Sandy Hook barrier peninsula marked the entrance to New York Harbor.

The airmen expected an update from *Rex* that evening, but none ever arrived.

Thursday morning, May 12, brought bad weather at Mitchel Field and even worse conditions at sea. The forecast, LeMay said, was that "ceilings would be down to nothing in the area where it was hoped we could find the steamship." Haynes asked LeMay to estimate the intercept time. Working from the information in the previous day's radiogram, LeMay said it should happen about 12:25 p.m. Unknown to LeMay, the prediction was given to NBC, which scheduled for that time a short-wave broadcast from the bomber.

The B-17s had begun to taxi out through the blowing rain when, at 8:30 a.m., they received an update message from *Rex.* "Immediately I saw that the *Rex* wasn't nearly as close in as we had expected her to be," LeMay said. "There wasn't much margin remaining." *Rex* was 725 miles from New York. LeMay had included in his calculation the possibility of bisecting the route ahead of the ship and searching to find it. Now, they would have to make the intercept on the first effort.

The three airplanes plowed eastward through squalls, rain, hail, and downdrafts. "Most of the time, we couldn't even see the water, and turbulence was heaving us all over the sky," LeMay said. About 11 a.m., a break in the weather let LeMay get a check on speed and drift. Headwinds, more intense than predicted, had bled more than 11.5 mph from the ground speed. The B-17s were soon back in the murk.

Meloy, who had been riding in the waist section with the airsick NBC crew, made his way up to the navigator's station to tell LeMay the broadcast would begin at 12:25 p.m. and that delaying it was not possible. "There was no longer any safety margin, but the present course should bring us into a perfect interception of the liner," LeMay said. "*If* I was correct in my calculations. It had all been dead reckoning."

At 12:23, the airplanes broke out of the last squall and into bright sunshine, flying low and line abreast, 610 miles east of Sandy Hook. *Rex* was dead ahead. Cousland was first to see it and radioed to the other airplanes: "There it is! There it is!" Two minutes later, the three B-17s passed *Rex.* Hundreds of passengers were on deck, wrapped in raincoats and scarves, and waving. Meloy exchanged radio greetings with *Rex's* captain.

On the next pass, photographer Goddard got his best shot—two B-17s sweeping past *Rex* at smokestack level. NBC reported the intercept live, on a coast-to-coast hookup.

The weather coming back was even worse than it was going out. When the B-17s landed at Mitchel, Cousland summoned LeMay to look at his aircraft, which had flown through a hailstorm. "All the leading edges of the wings and the nose of the airplane were pebbled and pitted," said LeMay, who added that it "looked like a gang of blacksmiths had been beating on them with ball-peen hammers."

The wargames went on for another week, but the main event was over.

Goddard's photo appeared the next day on the front pages of hundreds of newspapers. Magazines picked it up as well. Hanson Baldwin described the mission in detail in the *New York Times.* He said it was "one from which valuable lessons

LeMay (l) was the navigator on B-17 No. 80, and Maj. Caleb Haynes (r) was the aircraft's pilot.

about the aerial defense of the United States will be drawn" and that it furnished "a striking example of the mobility and range of modern aviation."

The Navy pitched a fit. The next day, Eaker was conferring with Andrews when the GHQ Air Force commander got an urgent call from Craig, the Army Chief. He, Craig, had gotten complaints from Secretary of the Navy Claude A. Swanson and Adm. William D. Leahy, Chief of Naval Operations. They said the *Rex* intercept "was in violation of the Navy's prerogative of controlling the sea approaches."

Craig told Andrews that Air Corps operations henceforth would not be permitted to extend beyond a line 100 miles from the US shoreline. The strange 100-mile restriction was enforced intermittently. Maj. Gen. Stanley D. Embick, Army deputy chief of staff, suggested lamely that it had been imposed as a safety measure. In 1939, the War Department authorized some exceptions to the policy for training purposes, provided there was no publicity.

The order itself is the subject of a minor mystery. All agree that Andrews, when informed of the new policy, asked to see the order in writing. Brig. Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, who in 1938 was assistant chief of the Air Corps and later Chief of the US Army Air Forces, reported that he never saw such a written order. However, Andrews told Eaker in April 1943—five years later—that a copy was in the files at his headquarters in London.

A month later, Andrews died in an air crash and the order has not been seen since. "Undoubtedly," Eaker asserted, "it had been removed by a current member of the Andrews staff with prior service on the War Department General Staff, who thus appreciated the possibility of its embarrassment of the Army and Navy."

Arnold came to doubt that such a document ever existed, but there is no question that Craig had issued the proscription.

"As far as I know," Arnold wrote in his 1949 memoirs, "that directive has never been rescinded. A literal-minded judge advocate might be able to find that every B-17, B-24, or B-29 that bombed Germany or Japan did so in technical violation of a standing order."

The Navy and the War Department could fume all they wanted about the intercept, but GHQ Air Force had made its point. Heavy bombers were long-range instruments of power and capable of actions a long way from home. The issue had moved beyond the question of coastal defense.

Some months after the *Rex* intercept, Secretary of War Harry H. Woodring canceled a planned purchase of more B-17s in 1939. His action was superseded by a call by President Roosevelt for an Air Force of 20,000 airplanes. By 1941, B-17s were coming off the production line in significant numbers.

Maj. George Goddard, flying in No. 81, snapped this famous photo of two B-17 bombers sweeping past* Rex *at smokestack level. On deck were hundreds of passengers cheering them on.

Into History

To this day, Navy diehards claim the *Rex* intercept was a sham and that the B-17s were guided to the point of rendezvous by continuous radio signals from the ship. They do not offer any supporting evidence.

History was not yet finished with the principal players in the *Rex* affair.

Harris Hull, the Reserve lieutenant who suggested the operation to Eaker, went on active duty with the Army Air Forces in 1942, remained in service for 22 years, and retired as a brigadier general in 1964.

Eaker built the World War II Eighth Air Force, commanded it during the darkest days of the Combined Bomber Offensive, and retired as a lieutenant general. In 1985, in recognition for his distinguished service to the nation, Congress promoted him to four-star rank on the retired list.

Andrews became commander of all US forces in the European Theater. Had he not perished in that 1943 crash, he—rather than Dwight D. Eisenhower—might have commanded the D-Day landings.

Olds was a major general with prospects of further promotion when he died at age 47 in 1943. His son, Robin Olds, also went on to considerable fame as an Air Force leader.

Haynes, pilot of the lead B-17 on the *Rex* intercept, retired as a major general. Meloy, the mission commander, reached the level of brigadier general.

The biggest future of all belonged to the dauntless No. 80 navigator, Curtis LeMay. He was almost universally regarded as the best combat leader in the Army Air Forces in World War II, commanding B-17 units in Europe and B-29s in the Pacific. In the 1950s, he made Strategic Air Command the most powerful military force in history. He served as USAF Chief of Staff from 1961 to 1965. Through it all, he frequently would describe himself as "a navigator by nature."

In September 1944, Italy had surrendered and *Rex* was in German hands. Germany planned to block Trieste harbor by sinking the big ship at the entrance. However, *Rex* was attacked en route by Royal Air Force Beaufighters and sent to the bottom.

In 1946, surviving officials of the Italian steamship line proposed to salvage *Rex* and recommission it, but the capsized hulk lay in a section of Trieste Harbor that was within the boundary of Yugoslavia. Belgrade blocked the recovery and junked the wreckage in 1947.

In August 2007, the US Air Force commemorated the *Rex* intercept. In this operation, three B-52s from Barksdale AFB, La., intercepted the Military Sealift Command's USNS *2nd Lt. John P. Bobo,* a maritime pre-positioning ship, several hundred miles east of Bermuda. Call sign for the lead B-52 was Rex 51.

The B-52s were given only a ballpark idea of where *Bobo* was but had no difficulty in finding it. The Air Force said the flight validated long-range homeland defense capabilities to find and identify ships far from the US coast. ■

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force *Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributing editor. His most recent article, "A New Look at Roles and Missions," appeared in the November issue.*