History of Dresden

Dresden is located in eastern Germany on the Elbe River approximately 110 miles south of Berlin and close to the borders of the Czech Republic and Poland. Dresden, first settled by monks in a missionary settlement in the 11th century, is the capital of the German State of Saxony. During the Middle Ages rich deposits of silver, tin, copper and iron were discovered which developed Saxony into a center of craftsmanship and light industry.

Saxon monarchs also held the great distinction as one of the “electors” which gave it the privilege of electing the Holy Roman Emperor. In 1465, the electors made Dresden their principle residence. From 1697 to 1763, Dresden experienced most of its architectural and artistic innovations under ruler Augustus I, the Strong, who also became the King of Poland. Augustus I, who traveled extensively in Europe, brought back many ideas to make Dresden more like other cities he visited. In this Age of Enlightenment, the city became a landmark of Baroque architectural masterpieces becoming known as the Florence on the Elbe. During this time two famous city landmarks were built, the Zwinger arena and the Frauekirche cathedral. Dresden became a center of art, poetry and music. The last Saxon monarch abdicated in 1918 and Saxony became part of Germany.

Prelude to Destruction

In 1939, Dresden was the 7th largest city in Germany with a population of 642,000. In mid-February 1945, the city’s population swelled to over 1.2 million primarily due to refugees fleeing the Russians. While many large cities lay in ruins in 1945, Dresden still survived with little damage. The first bombing raid was in October 1944, with Dresden as a secondary target, claiming 435 lives. This was such an unusual event that the population traveled to the bombed areas to see what happened. Children collected and sold shrapnel to the visitors. Many agreed this was an unfortunate oversight by an allied navigator. A second raid in January 1945 targeted the nearby oil refinery and the Dresden marshalling yards. Allied aircrews experienced heavy flak on route, but were surprised that there was none over the city. In this raid 376 were killed. The flak batteries surrounding Dresden were moved in January 1945 to the eastern front and larger industrial cities. Dresden authorities had not taken measures to strengthen air raid shelters or provide concrete bunkers, as did other cities in Germany. Local rumors were encouraged that Dresden would be spared because it was to be reserved by the Allies for an occupation headquarters after the war or it was a hospital city. Many industrial and banking offices were moved to Dresden from other parts of Germany because it was considered safe. Phones, water, electricity and trams still worked in the city best known for its fine porcelain. Allied prisoners numbered 26,000 in the area; many recently captured at Arnhem and the Ardennes. Militarily, Dresden contained only a few minor targets including a major railroad line and marshalling yard, some dispersed military industries (the largest being Zeiss Ikon, AG, with several optics plants) and a barracks and parade area.

Allied Bombing Plan

The Yalta conference, February 4-11, 1945, on the future of Europe was looming for the allies. The western allies (US and UK) were negotiating from a

Continued on Page 8
position of weakness since the Soviets initiated what would become the final offensive of the war in the east on January 12, driving into Prussia and Silesia. The British suggested that the Soviets could be assisted, and lend support to Churchill in Yalta, if the US and UK could bomb targets in eastern Germany to halt the retreat of German forces and prevent reinforcements from the west.

This show of force was meant to impress Stalin. Due to weather conditions, this massive raid did not take place before Yalta. The raids called for the use of a combination of high explosives (to shatter existing buildings into combustible material) and incendiary bombs (to ignite them) to inflict immense devastation in areas previously undamaged. The US was not in favor of bombing civilian areas, but though careful negotiation, the British won out. The raid was approved on January 25, while the Russians were only 70 miles from Dresden. When granted permission to bomb Dresden, “Bomber” Harris decided to achieve success by creating a deliberate fire storm, similar to the one in Hamburg that killed 40,000 people in July 1943. The Dresden raid would be unique due to the use of a three-pronged attack.

Dresden’s beautiful skyline prior to the bombing.

Two groups of Lancaster bombers dropped red parachute flares and green target indicator bombs that illuminated the city for the marking planes that followed. They also dropped long-delayed high explosive time bombs that would interfere with rescue efforts later. Marker Mosquito bombers led by a “Master Bomber” marked the target area with red marker flares affectionately called “Christmas Trees” by the Germans. The main aiming point for the first raid was a cycle track. Although no one took the raid seriously, the population just made it to the shelters as the first bombs fell at approximately 10:10 pm. In this raid, 245 British Lancaster bombers poured high explosives and incendiaries on the city. By 10:30 pm the bombers were on their way back to England. When the air raid siren first went off, most trains in the station, which were filled with refugees, were safely moved to the marshalling yard. The yards were not hit during any of the 3 raids on Dresden. The inner city was now ablaze. A half-hour later, a fire storm erupted that sucked all the air out of the air raid shelters. Most below ground died painlessly of asphyxiation. Their bodies were either incinerated from the intense heat or melted into thick liquid pools. The main railroad station was hit and for weeks after the raid mangled bodies...
were recovered. Below the station, which was not made into a reinforced shelter by city officials, of the two thousand taking refuse, 100 were burned alive and 500 asphyxiated before the doors could be opened. The tornado like wind of the firestorm ripped the clothes off any unfortunate individuals still outside then sucked them into the fire to be interred alive. After the first raid, the trains filled with refugees returned to the station. Over 10,000 survivors ran toward the Grosser Garten, an open-air park, to seek relief.

At 1:22 am a second wave of 529 British and Canadian Lancaster bombers attacked without the air raid warning siren going off. The Grosser Garten was one of the aiming points in the second raid, as well as other untouched areas of the city. For day’s, clothes, debris and dismembered limbs hung in the scorched branches of trees. This second attack, three hours after the first attack, was meant to disrupt all rescue effort and attack while the Luftwaffe night fighters were off guard. Any rescuers arriving either perished in the firestorm or were pushed back by the wave of people fleeing the doomed city. The Altmarkt, the old market square, was jammed with survivors. As the second raid commenced, hordes jumped into a concrete emergency water tank to escape the heat of the firestorm. There were no handholds so non-swimmers sunk to the bottom dragging the swimmers with them. Five days later rescue workers arrived to find the tank full of swollen corpses and incinerated bodies in the square. The bodies in the square shrank so much that 30 could be carried away in a small cart. The railroad cars that were returned to the station received the full force of the second raid. In the hospitals, the wounded were dragged to the banks of the Elbe River and laid in rows on the grass to await the daylight.

The third prong of the attack arrived at 11:30 am on February 14, with 211 American Flying Fortresses dropping almost 500 tons of high explosive bombs and incendiaries. Again no air raid warning was sounded. The destruction was extended across the entire city. In support of the raid, P-51 Mustangs diving low, machine-gunned the banks of the Elbe, the remnants of the Grosser Garten and the exits to the city crammed with many women and children.

The Luftwaffe attacked few allied bombers en route to the Dresden raids. No flak or searchlights were left in Dresden to defend against the allied onslaught. Luftwaffe fighters sat helplessly on the runway ready to attack while the bombers were over Dresden, but were not deployed due to a breakdown of communications.

All told, almost 4 thousand tons of bombs were dropped on the city of which 1.5 thousand tons were incendiary bombs in the brilliantly executed three pronged attack.

An additional American B-17 raid took place on February 15 outside of the original attack plan. Dresden was a secondary target, but most of the city was continued on page 10
been preaching for months of the nightmare of the Morgenthau Plan the allies were to discuss at Yalta. The raid added credence to his ranting and fueled propaganda of the allies killing women and children in Dresden. The western allies blamed the Russians for coercing them into the attack. This was not true. Some believe this was one of the seeds for the upcoming “Cold War” with Russia. Inquiries began and a scapegoat was needed. In the end, Sir Arthur Harris was chosen. After the war he left England to live in exile in South Africa, never to be honored by the country he served.

The bombing of Dresden did not hasten the war’s end. The Russians marched in on the last day of the war, May 6, 1945, and plundered what was left of the city including art and other valuables. The special office that was set up to track the dead and missing was shut down and the records destroyed. The jewelry and rings of the dead were shipped back to Moscow along with the other plundered goods. Dresden’s future was to remain bleak for it was to become part of East Germany.

The Zwinger was reconstructed after the war. When I visited Dresden and the Zwinger in 1980, there was still anti-American propaganda about the bombing and a whole display on the destruction of the city. The East German Government replaced bombed out areas with drab concrete structures. The Frauekirche cathedral was left in ruins for almost 50 years as a stark reminder of that night. It is scheduled to be reconstructed and open in 2006. Today Dresden is going through a new renaissance by rebuilding the city to its former splendor. The city is crowded again with parking spaces in short supply.

In Heidefriedhof cemetery, a stone slab commemorates the dead. It still stands in 2003 to honor the 29,000 victims that are in mass graves. However, this may be misleading because this number is only for the remains that could be counted.

Bibliography
2. RHS Crossman, *Apocalypse At Dresden*, Esquire Magazine, November 1963
4. www. Airforcehistory.hq.af.mil
5. www.travel.guardian.co.uk
6. www.lodging-germany.com

Weihnacht - 1945
Rußland Prisoner
“The Good Soldier” by Frederick Novotny

The cold was intense. We huddled around a small woodburning stove and the mood was somber for all of us. Not being home at Christmas was bad enough. But we knew nothing about the fate of our families. And none of us knew whether we would ever see our families again, or if we would ever be able to leave Russia.

Not, to be sure, if it were up to Tovarisch Frankfurter, an NKVD Captain who spoke German fluently and was filled with a hatred for us.

I remember about noon of Christmas Eve, one of our kameradens came into our barracks, wet and snow-covered, carrying a large pine branch. How he got it none of us knew. But we looked at one another and everyone began to cry. The past few months had been too much for us. But we were determined to celebrate Christmas, so we nailed the pine branch to a bunk post, decorated it with bits of paper and sat down to look at our “Christmas Tree”. We started singing, “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht” when the door burst open and Captain Frankfurter stood there, arrogant, menacing and swaying. “Are you celebrating Christmas?” he demanded, and we nodded.

“Not in Russia you German pigs, “ he shouted. Then he tore the branch off the bunk post, opened the window and threw it out into the snow.

“Don’t ever try to celebrate any of your holidays again as long as you are in Russia,” he said. Then he turned and left and we remained in our room, very hungry and very cold. Long into the night, we remained there and told one another stories about our past Christmases and what they had meant to us. This one we would never forget. But it certainly was not a Christmas any of us would cherish.

Gefreiter Frederick Novotny
2./Pz. Füsliier-Regt.
Grossdeutschland
Taken from the book:
“The Good Soldier” by Fred. Novotny