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Eyewitness Götz Bergander Recalls the Bombing of Dresden (Retrospective Account)

From February 13-15, 1945, British and American warplanes bombed the city of Dresden. This aerial campaign completely destroyed large sections of the inner city and killed an estimated 20,000 to 40,000 people. In the following report, eyewitness Götz Bergander recalls the events of February 13, 1945.

There had been two American daylight attacks on Dresden, one in October 1944, one in January 1945. The latter was somewhat heavier and we knew that Dresden wasn't going to come out of it untouched. Nevertheless, we had no idea what we were in for; we didn't have the experience they had in Hamburg, Berlin, Kassel, or the Ruhrgebiet.

I got myself a grid map of Germany. You could listen in on a radio channel—we called it the flak channel but it actually came from the headquarters near Berlin—which transmitted coded air intelligence. Whenever I was home I listened to this channel and marked the flight paths on the large map which I'd covered with onionskin paper. I still have this map.

And that's how it was on the evening of February 13, which happened to be Mardi Gras. You could determine the approach of a massive raid far into central Germany, beyond Leipzig. When the alarm sounded, it was approximately 20 minutes before 10:00 P.M.

The city was already filled with refugees; everything was a dull, war gray. The train stations were bursting with people. I had already participated in some so-called refugee aid there. We received refugees from Silesia and tried to get them and their baggage out of the city as quickly as possible. They were taken to old dance halls, ballrooms, and cinemas in the suburbs, but some always remained in the city center—those who'd just arrived and had not yet been accommodated.

According to certain city documents, Dresden had approximately 640,000 inhabitants, and I'd estimate that there were perhaps a million people in the city, so there were about 300,000 refugees. There were no bunkers at all—not one public air raid shelter. At Dresden's main train station, luggage storage rooms and basements had been set up as shelters.

People thought Dresden would be spared. There were rumors that the British thought a great deal of Dresden as a cultural center. The story also went around that an aunt of Churchill's lived in Dresden, and in 1945 the rumor circulated that the Allies intended to use Dresden as their capital. Even by then, we expected partition; we thought the Russians would occupy the eastern half and the others the western half. Finally, people said, Dresden is full of hospitals.

All of this was wrong. All these claims, including the one that Dresden was protected because it was a "hospital" city, were false. Dresden was completely unprotected. The flak had been withdrawn during the winter. Half the guns were sent to the Ruhr to strengthen the air defense there, only to be lost when the Americans overran the area. It was ridiculous. The Dresden anti-aircraft troops weren't killed in Dresden, but died fighting against the Americans.

As I listened to the flak channel, I had a feeling of ever-increasing dread, but layered with excitement. You could compare it to what every soldier feels before he has to leave the trench. You're afraid, yet at the same time very excited, wondering what's going to happen. Talk about butterflies! I took my radio down to the air-raid shelter and tried to tune into the flak channel. Our shelter warden was outside.

While I was still fiddling with the radio dial he came running down into the cellar and called, "It's getting light, it's getting light, it's bright as day outside! They're coming, they're coming, the dive bombers are here!" I told him: "But that's impossible, dive bombers can't fly at night." He said: "I saw them, they came right over the Friedrichstadt hospital." After the war we found out that he had really seen Mosquitos come down with target flares. They dropped the target markers about 500 yards from where we lived, and the markers exploded in the air before they hit the ground. The so-called "Christmas trees" came down by parachute. Everything was quiet for awhile, until we heard the bombers and the first explosions.

It was as if a huge noisy conveyor belt was rolling over us, a noise punctuated with detonations and tremors. It lasted for about 25 minutes before it gradually ceased. Then there was absolute quiet.

I had tuned in to the local air raid broadcasts, and their last announcement had been, "Attention! Attention! This is your local air defense office. Bombs in the city area. Citizens, keep sand and water ready." Then it was cut off.

I went outside after this first attack because our warden told us we had to look for incendiaries. We didn't find any, but coming out of the cellar was unforgettable: the night sky was illuminated with pink and red. The houses were black silhouettes, and a red cloud of smoke hovered over everything. I left our courtyard and climbed onto the roof of the factory next door with my camera. I thought, "You have to take a picture of this."

People ran toward us totally distraught, smeared with ash, and with wet blankets wrapped around their heads. These people made it out of the burning areas without too much difficulty,

because the firestorm only developed about half an hour to an hour after the first of the two night attacks. All we heard was, "Everything's gone, everything's on fire."

In the meantime, many people had gathered in our courtyard. They had all come to our house because it was still intact. Everyone talked at once until someone yelled, "They're coming back, they're coming back!" Sure enough, through the general confusion we heard the alarm sirens go off again. The alarm system in the city had ceased to function, but we could hear the sirens from the neighboring villages warning of a second attack. That's when I was overcome with panic, and I'm also speaking for the rest of my family and those who lived in our house. It was sheer panic! We thought this couldn't be possible, that they wouldn't do such a thing. They wouldn't drop more bombs on a city that was already an inferno. We were a target not even the worst shot could miss. We rushed into the cellar, and the second attack began just like the first one.

The first raid was flown by the famous 5th Bomber Group which had been specially preselected for the initial incendiary attack. The rest of the bomber groups came in for the second attack. The British really put everything they had into the air that night, though not all of it was used against Dresden. Approximately 800 planes were deployed against Dresden, and another 300 went against a refinery near Leipzig.

This attack left exhaustion and tension in its wake, a feeling of utter helplessness and terror. Since high-explosive bombs came down in our immediate vicinity, we had no idea of what it looked like outside. Neither did we hear the slapping sound of incendiaries. There was an indescribable roar in the air: the fire. The thundering fire reminded me of the biblical catastrophes I had heard about in my education in the humanities. I was aghast. I can't describe seeing this city burn in any other way. The color had changed as well. It was no longer pinkish-red. The fire had become a furious white and yellow, and the sky was just one massive mountain of cloud. The blaze roared, with intermittent blasts of either delayed-action bombs or unexploded bombs which were engulfed by the flames.

In the morning I turned on my radio and listened to the BBC. On the seven o'clock news, the BBC reported: "Last night, Dresden, one of the few German cities thus far to be spared, was attacked by RAF bombers with great success."

Later, people arrived from the inner city asking if we still had water. We said yes and opened the hydrants. Several of them settled into our house, but many others told us, "Out, out, get out of the city. Get away from here," and went on. Some were speechless with horror. They only said, "My home and everything in it are gone."

Since the factory supplied its own power and water, it could be kept running. My father, who was the manager, had to decide whether work should continue. We produced yeast for baked goods. My father said that food was important, so we'd have to keep operating. And the workers showed up too. I don't know if anyone can work like the Germans. It was amazing. Some even came on their bicycles between the two night raids. I still remember one of them pedaling up

and my father asking him, "What are you doing here?" And he replied, "I just had to see if the shop's still in one piece."

The city was absolutely quiet. The sound of the fires had died out. The rising smoke created a dirty, gray pall which hung over the entire city. The wind had calmed, but a slight breeze was blowing westward, away from us. That's how, standing in the courtyard, I suddenly thought I could hear sirens again. And sure enough, there they were. I shouted, and by then we could already hear the distant whine of engines. We rushed down into the cellar. The roar of the engines grew louder and louder, and the daylight attack began. This was the American 8th Air Force, and their attack came right down on our heads.

Normally, there were only 20 to 25 of us down in the cellar. But now, with many people off the street, including those who'd stopped over at our house, there were about 100 of us. Nevertheless, no one panicked—we were too numb and demoralized from the night before. We just sat there. The attack rolled closer, and then a bomb hit. It was like a bowling ball that bounced, or jumped perhaps, and at that moment the lights went out. The whole basement filled with dust. When the bomb carpet reached us, I crouched in a squatting position, my head between my legs. The air pressure was immense, but only for a moment. The rubber seals on the windows and the steel doors probably helped to absorb some of the impact. Someone screamed, and then it was quiet. Then a voice shouted, "It's all right, nothing's happened." It was the shelter warden.

Someone turned on a flashlight. We could see again, and that meant a lot. If it had remained dark, I don't know if the people wouldn't have jumped up and screamed to get out. However, after this flashlight went on everyone relaxed, and in spite of the loud crash that made me think the whole house was caving in on top of us, a loud voice shouted, "Calm down, calm down, nothing's happened." Although the drone of the bombers faded away, we heard another load of bombs explode in the distance. The entire episode lasted about 15 minutes.

We listened for it to become quiet again. The deathly silence that ensued was a stark contrast to the previous minutes. Our house was still standing, a true miracle. There were no more windows and the entire roof had been torn off and strewn about the street. In front of the house there was such an enormous crater that I thought, my God, it's not even 20 yards away, how did this house ever make it through as well as it did?

After a while, we began to clear the rubble out of our apartment. It was one big junk pile. We were so preoccupied with ourselves and the thought that we might be the next to go up in flames, it never occurred to us to go immediately into the city to help dig people out. Compared to those people still trapped in their cellars twelve hours after the night raids, waiting for someone to get them out, our problems were laughable.

Source of English translation: Johannes Steinhoff, Peter Pechel, and Dennis Showalter, *Voices from the Third Reich*. Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1989, pp. 227-31.

Source of German original: Johannes Steinhoff, Peter Pechel and Dennis Showalter, eds., *Deutsche im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Zeitzeugen sprechen*. Munich: Schneekluth 1989, pp. 324-29.