

# intelligence in public media

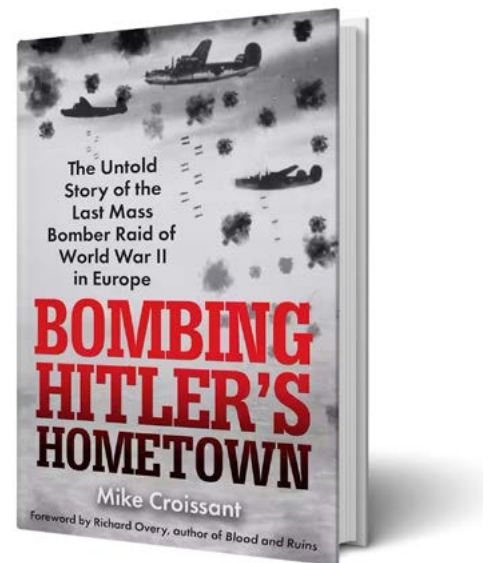
## *Bombing Hitler's Hometown The Untold Story of the Last Mass Bomber Raid of World War Two in Europe*

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Former CIA officer Mike Croissant has produced a highly readable account of the last massed US bombing raid over World War II's German Reich, which targeted Linz, Austria, on April 25, 1945—just two weeks before Germany would surrender. In some respects, this is a labor of love and remembrance of the author's uncle, who survived the raid only to perish with six other war veterans in an aircraft accident in Wisconsin just weeks after returning home. Yet it is much more than that, telling in considerable, page-turning detail how the Linz raid was prepared and executed, as well as its impact on the men who flew it, on Austrian civilians on the ground, and on the war's course. In doing so, Croissant has recorded a microhistory of a bombing raid that will be of enduring interest to readers of military history for years to come.

The author opens with the raid's origin and initial planning before backtracking to explain Adolph Hitler's youthful connection to Linz. In doing so, Croissant demonstrates that Linz and its inhabitants had no wider role in creating the dictator than did Austria or Germany during the early 1900s. Yet, protected for years from bombing raids by extensive air defenses, emplaced as a result of its connection to the fuhrer, by 1945 Linz's luck had run out.

Croissant's detailed telling of the experiences of the American fliers involved in the raid is some of the best prose of the widely explored air war genre. Numerous personal stories unfold rapidly but in a way that allows readers to easily juggle a considerable number of personalities and accounts. Giving background and details

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## *Bombing Hitler's Hometown*

derived from Croissant's own interviews—which offer a priceless record as the Greatest Generation fades into eternity—enables readers to quickly feel as if they know these men and in a small way come to share their suffering and sacrifice as they endure danger, fighting, and too often death. Another value of the book is in revealing the wartime experiences of several men who would later go on to fame, such as future senator and presidential candidate George McGovern and television producer Norman Lear.

Croissant's book also rightly highlights contributions of the under-appreciated B-24 Liberator heavy bomber, which is long overdue. Despite making major contributions to the US bombing campaign over Nazi Germany, the Liberator has too long flown in the shadow of the better known and much-heralded B-17.

Attention too is paid to Austrian civilians on the ground affected by the raid, another often-overlooked part of such bombing campaigns. The author nicely balances these depictions as neither wholly deserving Nazi targets nor as innocent victims, instead depicting both, as their individual actions suggest and caught amidst a global struggle.

One unusual note in the book is its detailed treatment of US fliers who fell into Soviet hands. Although most reached Soviet lines intentionally, because combat damage prevented their planes from returning to Italian bases, as Croissant shows in considerable, often-painful detail despite being allies, the Soviets were hardly friends of these desperate Americans. In fact, reaching Soviet lines was often as dangerous for them as falling into German hands. Accounts of Soviet wartime brutality are hardly new, but these stories should serve as a wakeup call for those few who remain blinded to Russia's painful reality.

Other unique post-raid personal accounts include those of fliers sent not to German Air Force-run POW stalags, but rather to infamously brutal SS-controlled

concentration camps. Like the accounts of Soviet treatment, these gripping, horrifying experiences will have readers blanching at their depiction of just how far our fellow humans can devolve into savagery. Yet these are stories we need to remember.

Because this is a military history, intelligence plays a background, supporting role throughout the book. However, late in the volume an officer of CIA's predecessor, the wartime Office of Strategic Services (OSS), makes an interesting starring turn, introduced as an unknown man whistling a few bars of Yankee Doodle while walking past the cell of crashed Linz raid flyers who had been sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp. The whistler was OSS officer Jack Taylor, whose presence in the hellish camp had come in a far more roundabout way than the captured airmen he was quietly reaching out to that day. The 33-year-old California orthodontist joined the Navy at the war's outbreak, but his prewar sailing experience quickly attracted the attention of the maritime component of the new OSS, and he was soon teaching small boat tactics and underwater demolition. Eventually he had logged 15 covert missions behind Axis lines on the Mediterranean coast. This experience led to his command of Operation DUPONT, a covert mission to gather intelligence about German defenses in southern Austria. The operation was a disaster from the start, and Taylor was captured and sent to Mauthausen for execution. He was spared that fate but suffered multiple beatings. His whimsical musical greeting lifted the spirits of prisoners and offered all the hope any of them would have until the US Army liberated them.

*Bombing Hitler's Hometown* in a broader sense tells the 15th Air Force's story, which has too long been eclipsed by the better-known, England-based 8th Air Force, as notably told in Donald L. Miller's recent *Masters of the Air* and the accompanying television series. Croissant's welcome work makes an excellent companion to that volume and reminds readers of the great sacrifices our forebears made during the war. ■