

NEW YORK BENEATH A BOMBSIGHT

by
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*OF COURSE THIS "CAN'T HAPPEN"—
BUT SUPPOSE ENEMY BOMBERS EMPTIED
THEIR RACKS OVER MANHATTAN .*

THIRTY-FIVE floors above Madison Avenue, a sturdy man in his middle forties swung about in his swivel chair and motioned for his secretary to leave the office. He got up, shut the door, returned to his chair and sat down. He was a successful man, professionally and financially. No nonsense about him. No, sir. Just the type to get down to brass tacks.

“Listen,” he whispered. “It may be fantastic, as you say. But I think some day we are going to get some bombs down our necks. Did you know that several contractors here are being asked for bids on private air-raid shelters? Well, one of those requests is mine. I could name a few other people who feel in their bones that we’re in for trouble.”

“Do you think that New York might become another London?”

“Oh, no. Nothing like that.” Abruptly, he sat up straight and fixed me with an expression of deep concern. “Not that bad, but bad enough. Whatever it is, I’m preparing for it!”

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A professional photographer told me that he had found a place of safety for his expensive collection of lenses. He is carrying some of his instruments home every night, bringing back only those needed for each job. The rest are in a concrete vault in his backyard. "I can't get lenses and shutters if the country's being bombed," he said. "What I have must see me through."

The pontifical *Times* could hardly be accused of being a sensation-sheet. In its circumspect columns due notice has recently been taken of this phenomenon. It reported that Mayor La Guardia has been busy on a plan to protect New York against interruptions resulting from air-raids. "We've been studying this problem since just after Munich," the Mayor declared. "We have thus about two years' jump on other large cities in this country."

NEW YORKERS are expecting to be bombed. The War Department informed me officially that the probability of such a thing is "microscopic," but nothing the Army can say will relieve a mounting feeling of personal danger in the minds of New York's millions. So . . . suppose an enemy airplane flies here from anywhere and suddenly empties its bomb-racks upon Manhattan's clogged midtown streets. What happens?

Of course such an assumption is pure fantasy. But fantastic things occur every day in this unreal world. New York is wide open to a surprise raid by a disguised enemy bomber, or even to several such craft. Army men tell me

that such a gesture might very well be the "overture to the war" . . . an enemy's way of telling us sharply that he is on the way and knows what he is going to do.

New York is not defended in any way in which civilians can understand the term. There is a naval air and sea patrol operating offshore now to intercept any suspicious-looking airplane or surface ship approaching New York harbor. That is a protection against trickery on a small scale, not to be considered as a means of defense. New York harbor is defended by powerful coast-artillery bases which can stop an enemy fleet from sailing boldly up the Narrows and unloading an expeditionary force at the West Street piers. There are "about a hundred" mobile anti-aircraft guns scattered about the five boroughs, changing position from day to day.

If New York is bombed suddenly as a gesture of defiance, it will have to take that bombing until the U.S. Army, Navy and air forces can concentrate superior strength there. The bombing can be done only by subterfuge; cleverly-disguised planes masquerading as airliners perhaps. An enemy cannot approach this coast in force without detection; a few camouflaged bombers, approaching from different directions, would find nothing to hinder them.

New York would conceivably take fifty tons of bombs before the Army Air Corps could be notified and could get interceptor fighters in the air. The following day it might take fifty tons more. Fre-

quently there would be other sudden raids like that, continuing as long as our air forces were searching out the source of these ships and stopping them.

THE MAJOR problem, I am informed by the General Staff's planning section, is not the physical damage to the city inflicted by intermittent surprise raids. That is negligible. The headache is the immediate panic likely to seize the multi-tongued, emotional, jittery population of Manhattan. The problem is one of keeping the population quiet. Immediate blackout would be slapped on the whole metropolitan area, but would it be effective? Who is going to convince a Chinese down on Pell Street that he can't show a light over his door? Can street patrols of busy police see every crack of light in a thirty-story apartment house? What about the innumerable airshafts, skylights, fire-escape lights, illuminated street-numbers?

In Europe and in Japan, well-disciplined city populations have been rehearsing air-raid procedure under the sharp tutelage of dictators for several years. In Berlin this was carried to such gruesome extremes that civilians were suddenly subjected to street explosions, dummy bodies, the clanging of ambulance bells and the screech of warning sirens. Such instruction is impossible in New York. At the Mayor's office I was told why.

"Imagine an air-raid rehearsal at Columbus circle. The police rope off the streets; traffic stops

and lines of taxicabs and trucks back up down to Forty-Second. Ambulances go clanging through the police-lanes. Tin-hatted police carry stretchers. Half of the mob of bystanders can understand English half the time. Someone says: "What is it?" An officer replies, "This is an air-raid rehearsal." "*Air-Raid!*" shouts the man. And he's in a cigar store pumping nickels into a telephone warning all his relatives in Flatbush to get out. In Flatbush, word spreads that Manhattan is being bombed. In two minutes it's spread to Brooklyn and there would be lines of refugees clogging the bridges before anybody could explain matters."

It's the first few bombs that would set off the hysteria. Afterward, people would see, and convince themselves, that one load of bombs cannot plunge the city into darkness nor stop subway trains. The few such missiles possible to carry on long-range, disguised surprise raids would be dropped entirely for the resulting public panic and not for destructive purposes.

Thus Mayor La Guardia, Police Commissioner Lewis J. Valentine and Fire Commissioner John J. McElligott are approaching the defense of New York psychologically instead of tactfully. Their plans are pushing forward to the goal of curbing the New Yorker's tendency to run hog-wild if he is scared.

Three members of the New York Fire Department are in London now, taking intensive instruction in the art of enlisting wholesale civilian help to curb incendiary

fires started by aerial bombs. When they return, certain civilians will be asked to help the Department organize a similar plan in all the districts of the city. These men, in turn, will select their own assistants. Gradually an organization will form, but it will receive scant newspaper space. It will rehearse and practice, but the public will think it is part of the regular Fire Department.

Police plainclothesmen are making a separate survey of exits, stairways, danger-points which are likely to become seething jams of screaming people if word spreads that a bomb has fallen. A traffic-control plan is taking shape by means of which the police in any precinct can rush to previously-surveyed points and straighten out the swarms of vehicles that are bound to accumulate in such a case. Hospitals, nursing-homes, private sanitariums, every municipal institution—they are all surveyed now and ready to receive casualties. They will be people caught in the rush.

IF NEW YORKERS could absorb technical information as readily as they absorb broadcast dance-music, they could understand that the safest place in the city, in the event of an air-raid, is on top of the Empire State Building. Surprisingly, New York's immense skyscrapers are conceded to be the safest structures in the world at such a time. They will lose acres of windows; they will burst out in great gaps of falling bricks and exposed plumbing; the streets below will be chin-deep in wreckage. But the more exposed steel

framework remaining, the less chance of a bomb concussion affecting it.

Destruction like that of Coventry, Rotterdam and Warsaw is impossible in a steel-framed city. The Air Corps says so, and its officers have the combined experience of the world to guide them. No steel-framed building has ever been completely wrecked by an aerial bomb. None has yet become unlivable because of it. In Madrid, the International Telephone Building was bombed every few days for two years. It lost most of its exterior, but finally it sheltered great numbers of the city's bombed-out population. And its telephone exchange worked just the same.

At Washington, members of the planning section of the General Staff told me: "If you're in New York and bombs fall, stay out of subway stations, basements, any underground place of refuge. Thousands of the city's European refugees and foreign-born population will be jamming into places like that instinctively. Stay in your hotel; get up in any big steel building and read a book. Listen to your radio; it will give you more accurate information about what is going on than you could find if you joined the crowds."

If any normal person suffered a broken leg in an accident, he would go to a doctor and follow his instructions. If residents of New York, the one city in the United States most likely to be visited by panic-breeding enemy bombers, ever hear the subdued thunder of bombs in their streets, common

sense should tell them to heed the advice of experts. "Stay in your big steel apartment houses, keep out of the streets, be quiet." What percentage of the population will follow that excellent advice?

New York cannot be attacked in force, with enough damage to interrupt normal life, unless the entire U.S. Army, Navy and air forces have been disastrously defeated in a long war of continental proportions. But the city might, some day, be visited by sporadic raiders, bent on stirring up all the hell they can.

What will happen then no one can definitely predict.

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