HELL'S CAULDRON

THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF THE LANCASTER

RAF Bomber Command's Commander-in-Chief Sir Arthur Harris referred to Avro's mighty Lancaster as his "shining sword" — but it was only as good as the ordnance it could carry to the target. **IAN BOTT & CHRIS GIBSON** join forces to examine how the two combined to create one of the most effective weapons systems of the Second World War

MAIN PICTURE *RAF groundcrew chalk messages on 4,000lb High Capacity (HC) bombs — or "Cookies" — before they are loaded aboard No 83 Sqn Lancaster Mk I L7540/OL-U at RAF Mildenhall in Suffolk in May 1942.*

RAF AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH

TOP *Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris, C-in-C Bomber Command, oversaw the bombing of Germany, and under his command it became an effective and efficient organisation.*

"I believe that the Lancaster was the greatest single factor in winning the war"

— Sir Arthur Harris, Commander-in-Chief, RAF Bomber Command, in a letter to Avro, December 1945

THE HORRIFIC KNOWLEDGE that a single bomb, delivered by a single aircraft, can completely destroy a city has shaped military and political thinking since August 1945. The annihilation of cities before then was possible and a fairly regular occurrence, although it took many more aircraft, personnel and of course bombs. For the purposes of this article, it is the bomb loads of the Avro Lancaster that will be examined, as the famous bomber was the original city-destroyer and, if the US Army's General Leslie Groves had not intervened, a single Lancaster could have carried that single bomb used to destroy Hiroshima on August 6, 1945.

Less than seven months before, during February 13–15, 1945, RAF Bomber Command and the USAAF's Eighth Air Force destroyed the city of Dresden in eastern Germany. Earlier in the war, on the night of July 23/24, 1943, Bomber Command had attacked Hamburg in northern Germany, initiating a firestorm that destroyed the city. While the "glamour" weapons — the *Upkeep* "bouncing bomb" (see *TAH43*) and *Tallboy* and *Grand Slam* "earthquake bombs" — receive most of the attention, the bombs used on a day-to-day — or rather night-to-night — basis by Bomber Command have garnered little attention.

SPACE, NOT WEIGHT

Early in the war Bomber Command aircraft such as the Armstrong Whitworth Whitley, Handley Page Hampden, Short Stirling and Vickers Wellington were restricted in the variety of bomb type they could carry. This was not a weight problem but a space problem, and these pre-war designs could not carry the larger and heavier bombs that entered widespread use once the four-engined "heavies", specifically the Lancaster, appeared on the scene in early 1942.

These early-war bombers had been designed with bomb cells that could accommodate the standard 250lb (113kg) and 500lb (228kg) General Purpose (GP) bombs, although the Whitley and Wellington could carry the later 1,000lb (454kg) GP and even 2,000lb