Overview of the Robert Joseph Benford papers

Finding aid prepared by Hoover Institution Archives Staff
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Title: Robert Joseph Benford papers

Date (inclusive): 1946-1990

Collection Number: 2017C29

Contributing Institution: Hoover Institution Archives

Language of Material: English

Physical Description: 1 oversize box (1.3 linear feet)

Abstract: Reports, biographical data, clippings, and photographs relating to post-war American collection and analysis of German medical research during World War II, and to German war crimes.

Physical Location: Hoover Institution Archives


Access

The collection is open for research.

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Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], Robert Joseph Benford papers, [Box no.], Hoover Institution Archives.

Acquisition Information

Materials were acquired by the Hoover Institution Archives in 2017.

Accruals

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Related Collections


Biographical Note

Colonel, United States Air Force; commanding officer, Army Air Forces Aero Medical Center, Heidelberg, Germany, 1945-1947.

Robert Joseph Benford, a native of Omaha, worked his way through school as a newspaper reporter and a jazz musician, graduating from the medical school of the University of Nebraska in 1934. Soon after that he joined the US Army Air Forces. As a research associate in physiology at the Harvard School of Public Health, he helped develop and test aviators’ oxygen masks. During World War II, he was the senior staff medical officer of the XX Bomber Command, the first B-29 Superfortress unit to strike the Japanese mainland from bases in India and China. When World War II ended in 1945, United States Army Air Forces (AAF) set up a research center in Heidelberg, Germany. The AAF Aero Medical Center, as it was called, had as its mission "to bring back from Germany everything of aero medical interest and all information of importance to medical science in general." Benford commanded the facility and was able to bring together several dozen top German aero medical researchers and technicians and make it possible for them to continue some of their research projects. At the same time he oversaw a massive translation project from German into English of some two thousand medical research documents, mostly highly classified reports in support of the Luftwaffe.

Scope and Content of Collection

The papers of Robert Joseph Benford consist of reports, biographical data, clippings, and photographs chronicling the operation of the Army Air Forces Aero Medical Center and life in Germany in the immediate years following World War II. Benford’s “Report from Heidelberg: The Story of the Army Air Forces Aero Medical Center in Germany, 1945–1947” is a bound fifty-two-page mimeographed document illustrated with dozens of high-quality photographs pasted into the text. Given its mimeographed format and pasted-in photographs, the “Report from Heidelberg” was probably issued in no more than a dozen copies, for Colonel Benford and several of his colleagues and superiors. The quality of the paper is poor, a reflection of the postwar shortages of this commodity. Nonetheless, the quality of the printing and the placing of
illustrations is high. The hand-marbled cover illustrated with a woodcut of Heidelberg, as well as the precise fastening of the pages, speaks well of the binder’s craft.

Besides the report, the collection includes a scrapbook album of press clippings on the war-crime trials of leading Nazis, brochures, and a twenty-six-page “List of Personnel Involved in Medical Research and Mercy Killings” issued (probably in 1946) by the Office of US Chief of Counsel. The list includes the names of at least two of the German researchers hired by the center. Misspellings and lack of first names make possible identification of any others difficult.

Hoover’s Benford collection does not represent the colonel’s whole surviving archival legacy. Shortly before his death, he donated several boxes of his medical papers to Harvard Medical Library and his collection of jazz literature and records to the Library of Congress.

**Subjects and Indexing Terms**

- Human experimentation in medicine.
- World War, 1939-1945--Atrocities.
- World War, 1939-1945--Germany.
- War crimes--Germany.
- United States. Army Air Forces.