



Stephen L. McFarland

and Wesley Phillips Newton

TO COMMAND THE SKY

The Battle for Air Superiority
over Germany, 1942-1944

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Wesley Phillips Newton**

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To
Maurer Maurer, historian of air power
Carl E. McFarland, survivor of the Hump's "Aluminum Trail"
Connie McFarland and children, Jennifer and Jeffrey
Merlin Newton and children, Linda, Alan, and Brent

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PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

In the decade since *To Command the Sky* first appeared, the U.S. Air Force has experienced seemingly unparalleled, unchallenged, and relatively effortless control of the air. The current generation can be excused for taking such for granted, though it has not always been so. This success has been built on the experience of World War II, when the airmen whose story is told in this book fought, died, and killed to ensure victory for the United States.

Since Vietnam, the U.S. Air Force and its philosophers have engaged in a struggle to redefine American air power by emphasizing doctrine. Concurrent with this effort has been a reevaluation of its history through a doctrinal lens. In this indoctrination effort, writers on air warfare have struggled with terminology. Is it air superiority, command of the air, control of the air, counterair strategy, air supremacy, air dominance, or, in the words of the Air Force's basic doctrine publication, AFM1-1, "orchestrating aerospace control"? This doctrinal frenzy and these successes in actual wars, however, have not altered the lessons of this book nor the record of what happened in the Second World War.

Doctrine, at its most basic, is nothing more than what is taught by a person, group, or organization. To speak of an American or Ger-

man doctrine of air superiority in the Second World War, however, is to use the perspective gained in the almost sixty years since the events of this book to revise or rewrite what actually happened in 1942–1944. Tens of thousands of airmen died while hundreds of thousands of airmen fought to find a way to win the air war over Western Europe. To reduce this struggle to something called “doctrine” is to distort the events of the war. In 1942–1944, the issue of air superiority was in doubt. American commanders tried bombing, fighter sweeps, aerial escort, and guerilla air warfare to win air superiority. The struggle came down to attrition—cause death and destruction to the enemy at a rate the enemy could not sustain. This was not doctrine. This was not teaching. This was trying to win a war by destroying the enemy. As one of the men who participated in this struggle said, “we really didn’t know what we were trying to do. We were doing it but not defining it.”¹ Trying to identify doctrine here gives a sense of logic and order to a struggle that was in so many ways desperation and chaos.

The U.S. Army Air Forces won this battle for the skies over Western Europe due to numerical and technological superiority, courage, tactics, luck, and enemy mistakes, but more than anything else, training and a willingness to modify tactics and strategies as the war continued. The struggle came down to American versus German pilots for which numerical superiority only made a difference in the long run; for which the superiority of one aircraft over another disappeared in the few seconds available for actual combat when flying at a combined speed of six hundred or more miles per hour and because any American advantage disappeared as American pilots flew great distances to reach the German heartland; and for which courage abounded on both sides. Ultimately, however, it came down to training, strategy, and tactics. German tactics, strategy, and training policy did not evolve to keep pace with changing conditions and technologies, reflecting, perhaps, the inflexible dogma of the Nazi philosophy at the root of the war. As one student of this battle noted, “The Germans devised a brilliant strategy that was forced into a context in which it could not succeed.”² Hap Arnold, Barney Giles,

Jimmy Doolittle, William Kepner, Carl Spaatz, and the forces they led continually evolved and won. This was not doctrine. This was searching for the right combination of technologies, strategies, tactics, targets, and, most importantly, men to achieve victory.

To Command the Sky tells this story—a story for the ages. Let it always remain so.

1. Richard H. Kohn and Joseph P. Harahan, eds., *Air Superiority in World War II and Korea* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1983), 18.

2. William F. Andrews, “The Luftwaffe and the Battle for Air Superiority: Blueprint or Warning?” *Air Power Journal* 9 (fall 1995):6.

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Map of Europe showing distances to German targets from Eighth Air Force Headquarters at High Wycombe.

INTRODUCTION

The Allies were taking one of the greatest gambles of the war. The assembly of men and equipment on 6 June 1944 was the most concentrated, most vulnerable, and choicest target for German air power of the war. Including 8 divisions of ground and airborne soldiers and 5,000 ships arrayed along some 50 miles of the French Normandy coast, the Allied invasion of France was the penultimate event of 4½ years of British and 2½ years of American endeavor. Never in the war was so much effort concentrated at one point, at one time. Could Allied air forces hold off the savage Luftwaffe attacks everyone expected?

An operation such as OVERLORD was the type for which the Luftwaffe existed. It had been designed to be primarily a tactical air force, acting in support of the German army, and had functioned most successfully in that role. A powerful and prepared Luftwaffe would have meant defeat for the invasion forces. German pilots could hardly have missed. Any bomb dropped and nearly any bullet fired would have found a target, so compressed were Allied forces. Invading forces would have to control the air over the invasion front to have any chance at success.

The British officer who was the chief of the Allied tactical air

forces for the invasion felt the best way to defeat the Luftwaffe and control the air over the invasion front was to fight the Luftwaffe in a great swirling air battle the day of the invasion. Most American air commanders, mindful of the capabilities and mobility of air power, had reached the conclusion by mid-1943 that an invasion would require a prior strategic campaign for air superiority—to destroy the Luftwaffe in a war of attrition. They feared, however, that such a campaign might take too long.

The Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff, favoring the more prudent American approach, assigned the U.S. Army Air Forces' Eighth Air Force in the POINTBLANK directive of May 1943 the task of gaining control of the air. Though command of the air (the power to use airspace as desired)—requiring absolute control in all areas at all times—was nearly impossible, Eighth Air Force and its supporting cast would have to win at least air superiority (control of the air at a certain time and place to allow operations without prohibitive losses) or air supremacy (a greater and more extensive degree of air superiority) for the OVERLORD invasion to have a chance for success.¹ Eighth Air Force first had to force the Luftwaffe to turn to defending the Reich, forsaking the plans for offensive air warfare that had been at the root of German successes in the first years of the war. Second, Eighth Air Force had to win air superiority to allow continued strategic bombing, to prevent the Luftwaffe from going back on the offensive, and to permit the OVERLORD landings. The means by which Eighth Air Force completed this assignment is an untold story of World War II.

The need for air superiority stretched beyond the Normandy beaches. Even before Pearl Harbor the Army Air Forces had convinced President Roosevelt and other American leaders that an American strategic bombing campaign against Germany could contribute mightily to Allied victory in World War II. The proclaimed goal of American air power advocates was to destroy German military power through strategic daylight precision bombing to the extent that a cross-Channel invasion would be unnecessary. This idea had developed out of the shock accompanying victory in

World War I. Ten million soldiers and ten million civilians had died of all causes. For the military establishments of the major powers, the challenge was to insure that when the next war broke out, the armies would not get bogged down in four more years of trench warfare—a battle of attrition for which even the winners would be losers.

In the United States a fledgling Army air arm, with no tradition to bind it to the past, developed what it believed to be the answer to such wars—strategic precision bombing by day from high altitudes. By carrying the war to an enemy’s civilian population and industrial system, strategic bombers could force a quick end to any war and minimize casualties. America’s first air power strategist, William “Billy” Mitchell, had taught that bombers could destroy an enemy’s ability to wage war only if they controlled the air with the aid of fighters. A generation of American air leaders, despite Mitchell’s lead, came to believe that the bomber could always get through to its target, if properly armed, by fighting its way in, establishing its own local control of the air. Henry Arnold, chief of the Air Corps, made sure that all of his top-level commanders were “bomber” men—disciples of this doctrine. In the airmen’s minds, the primary purpose of air power in Europe during World War II would be strategic bombing. It was the only major contribution the airmen could make to the war effort that was largely independent of the Army and the Navy. This is a well-chronicled story.

The doctrine of strategic daylight precision bombing rested on two premises that would not be proven in the war. First, its supporters determined that the civilian population was the weak link in a nation’s defense. Unlike soldiers, they could not bear up against the horrors of modern war delivered to their doorsteps by strategic bombers. Still, this premise had to be disguised, for official American policy was against making civilians the targets of bombing. The second premise was the belief that a strategic bombing campaign could eliminate an enemy’s ability to wage modern war by destroying its industrial base. Mindful of their desire to win independence for the Air Force after World War II, the leaders of

the Army Air Forces were continuously sensitive to the possibility that strategic bombing would not measure up to the enormous investment they had convinced the country to make—over 35,000 heavy and very heavy bombers, over 660,000 tons of bombs on Germany and 165,000 tons on Japan.²

So concerned were they that after the war they invested much effort to evaluate the impact of strategic bombing. The U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, 208 reports for the European war alone, was the result. Though self-serving and designed from the first to justify the strategic bombing effort, the survey revealed the limitations of strategic bombing. Neither the morale nor the will of the bombed populations approached collapse. Physical destruction remained limited and largely ineffective until the second half of 1944, nearly five years after the war began. Germany had sufficient overcapacity to absorb the initial pounding. Dispersal, repair, and expansion compensated for additional bombing. Armies of laborers, free and unfree, insured adequate manpower. Possessing the largest machine-tool industry in the world more than compensated for damage done to machinery. In spite of the bombing, the German economy continued to expand until late in the war. In the words of John Kenneth Galbraith, a member of the Strategic Bombing Survey, “Strategic bombing was designed to destroy the industrial base of the enemy and the morale of the people. It did neither.”³

Still, the campaign did have an appreciable effect on Germany’s ability to wage war. The effort caused a mass diversion of scarce capital and resources to defensive operations, away from the offensive warfare that made German victories in the first three years of the war possible. Though production increased, strategic bombing “placed a ceiling on German war production which was well below what Germany, with skilful and more urgent management of its resources, was capable of producing after 1943.”⁴ Bombing made the German economy, one of the most efficient in the world, operate with great waste, forcing dispersal, upsetting timetables, eliminating the economies of scale, altering priorities, and disrupting communications.

But again, most of this occurred in the last year of the war, when Soviet armies were pressing on German borders in the east and British and American armies were racing across France. The end of the Third Reich seemed inevitable, with or without strategic bombing. Did strategic air power contribute to Allied victory in World War II? If it did, how?

The answer can be found in the struggle to achieve the air superiority that made the Allied invasion of German-occupied Europe possible. Ground actions such as an invasion were dependent on control of the air. Likewise, the bombing campaign itself, using somewhat slow four-engine bombers, also required control of the air to permit bombing without prohibitive losses. The relationship between the bombing campaign and air superiority was symbiotic—the bombers needed air superiority to permit further bombing, and the battle for air superiority required bombing to make the battle, for the Germans, worth fighting.

Air superiority faced many obstacles. Air power did not seize territory. There were no great battles in the traditional sense in the acquiring of air superiority, just one mission after another until the enemy wore down. The number of missions to achieve air superiority depended on the value of the targets and the enemy's will to defend them. No flags rose over conquered fortresses. Map makers did not change the colors of areas over which the Army Air Forces established control of the skies. Aerial combat was by nature mercurial. Aircrews gained air superiority and then had to regain it repeatedly. It was a truism, but what went up had to come down. The attackers seized control of the air over enemy territory with the right combination of training, technology, and numbers, but gave it up temporarily when their aircraft returned to base for refueling. An unlearned lesson from World War I was the incredible resiliency of air power. There would be no "knockout blow." The struggle had to be continuous, never letting up the pressure.

Air superiority was necessarily the antecedent of bombing warfare—an intermediate stage. Alone it could not win the war. It only permitted or prevented those operations that could: ground campaigns, supported by close air support, aerial resupply, and air