

After the war, Eisenhower came to the forefront as an advocate for an independent air arm.

Ike and the Air Force

By Herman S. Wolk



Without doubt, Gen. of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower is best remembered as the supreme commander of the huge Allied invasion force that on June 6, 1944 stormed the beaches of Normandy and as a popular, two-term American President in the 1950s. Even so, Eisenhower also should be recognized for another of his critical

professional roles: as a major player in the post-World War II struggle to create an independent United States Air Force.

In operations in North Africa and northwest Europe, Eisenhower the wartime leader came to depend heavily on the Army Air Forces for crucial support of ground forces. This culminated with D-Day, when the Allied air forces

Eisenhower felt airpower's role in the success of the D-Day operation could not be overemphasized. Here, Ike gives the order of the day to paratroopers at RAF Greenham Common, Britain, just before the Normandy invasion.

supported the Normandy landings and assured that Allied ground forces could move forward against a strong, well-entrenched enemy.

Immediately after the war, Eisenhower and Gen. Carl A. "Tooy" Spaatz, the USAAF commander, planned the postwar reorganization in which the wartime air arm would split away and become a separate service dedicated to airpower.

Eisenhower came to the forefront as an advocate for the separate Air Force. His dramatic, landmark testimony to the Senate committee considering unification proved compelling and tipped the scales in favor of its creation.

Eisenhower always got along well with airmen. In the mid-1930s, while working directly for Douglas MacArthur in the Philippines, 46-year-old Eisenhower learned to fly. He was tutored in the Stearman PT-13 by two Air Corps officers, Lt. Hugh A. Parker and Lt. William L. Lee, both of whom became generals during World War II. Apparently, neither MacArthur nor Eisenhower's wife, Mamie, knew of the flying training.

"Crack Pilot"

Typically, Eisenhower took flying lessons in the morning before reporting for duty with MacArthur. He found flying exhilarating and challenging. "I'm really picking this business up remarkably fast," he noted. "I'll bet that if I had started a little younger I could be a crack pilot by this time."

In July 1939, after passing a flight physical, Eisenhower was certified as a private pilot. He eventually logged 320 hours, both as a pilot and observer. His biographer noted that Eisenhower's flying lessons "remained one of the memorable highlights of his career."

Eisenhower, while still a staff officer in the 1930s, started thinking about concepts calling for air-ground teamwork. Early in World War II, in North Africa, he became convinced of the crucial importance of air operations to success on the battlefield. For Eisenhower, this was the prelude to his command of Allied forces in northwest Europe.

In May and June 1943, Eisenhower was involved in one of the most dramatic demonstrations of airpower in the entire war. This was the pounding into submission of the Axis garrison on the Mediterranean island of Pantelleria, in Operation Corkscrew. (See "Pantelleria, 1943," June 2002, p. 64.) The operation was an important prelude to the Allied

invasions of Sicily and Italy and went against the advice of his own planning staff. Not long before, Eisenhower had been stung by criticism from Gen. George C. Marshall, the US Army Chief of Staff, that he—Eisenhower—lacked boldness. Eisenhower conferred with then Lieutenant General Spaatz—at the time, commander of the Northwest African Air Forces—noting that he wanted to conquer the island with little use of ground forces. In effect, Ike had decided to make the reduction of Pantelleria a "laboratory to determine the effect of concentrated heavy bombing on a defended coastline."

Eisenhower directed Spaatz to pound the island, called the Gibraltar of the central Mediterranean, "with everything we had." Led by Maj. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle's Northwest African Strategic Air Forces, American and British air forces battered the island's Italian and German defenders until they surrendered.

This was the first time in history that a land force had surrendered without being defeated by other ground forces.

The strategic importance of the Pantelleria victory was that it set the wartime pattern for island invasions and for the eventual invasion of the European continent.

Eisenhower was delighted. He had a great deal riding on the operation, and he noted that "the ground forces were very reluctant to give their consent" to the air-dominated plan. The air forces, he stressed, said, "Yes, we can do it!"

Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Marshall, and Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold—who was then Army Air Forces commanding general—congratulated Eisenhower, who in turn thanked Spaatz for a great effort.

Turn to Normandy

Once the Allied leadership decided on the Normandy coast as the Allies' Western Front invasion point, the entire pre-invasion strategy revolved around the function of the air forces. (See "Eisenhower, Master of Airpower," January 2000, p. 62.) The evolving controversy over the role of airpower became so intense and potentially disruptive that Eisenhower threatened to resign his command "and go home."

Simply put, Eisenhower first made clear that the massive invasion would absolutely depend on the ability of the Air Forces to sweep the Luftwaffe out of the sky, to make certain that air supremacy was won and maintained.

Second, Eisenhower endorsed the so-called Transportation Plan, advocated by his deputy, RAF Air Chief Marshal Arthur W. Tedder, calling for massive air attacks on the French railway system to prevent the Germans from moving their forces to confront the Allied armada.

To accomplish this objective, Eisenhower required control of strategic bomber forces commanded by Spaatz and Air Chief Marshal Arthur T. Harris, both of whom argued that their bombers should strike targets inside Germany. (See "Bomber Harris," January 2005, p. 68.) Eisenhower however, emphasized that, because he had overall responsibility, he could not accept anything less than complete operational control.

Churchill supported Spaatz and Harris; Marshall and Arnold supported Eisenhower. When Churchill asked Roosevelt to help resolve the controversy, the President replied that he would not in any way insert himself into a decision made by Eisenhower as supreme commander.

Churchill ultimately gave in and Eisenhower gained control of strategic airpower for Operation Overlord.

Eisenhower felt airpower's role in the success of the D-Day operation could not be overemphasized. Mastery of the air meant that the Allied invasion force could "get and stay ashore," he said in retrospect. The decision to take control of the strategic bombers was his greatest contribution to the success of Overlord.

Less known is Eisenhower's major role in the postwar reorganization of the Army Air Forces. With instant demobilization after the war leaving the AAF a shell of its wartime composition, air forces had to fight for shares of the postwar troops.

The AAF objective of a 70-group, 400,000-man program was opposed by the War Department General Staff. In November 1945, however, Eisenhower said the importance of airpower in the postwar world "could not be overemphasized," and Army Air Forces had to have the force structure to accomplish its mission. The War Department then approved the 400,000-man force to support the 70-group program.

Eisenhower, having succeeded Marshall in November 1945 as Army Chief of Staff, then got together with Spaatz, who in February 1946 had succeeded Arnold as AAF commander.

Eisenhower and Spaatz implicitly trusted each other. They had served



body is an operator with us because even our General Staff feels they have to follow up and we have had no body which is compelled by the very nature of its organization and function to do nothing but think, and I believe we need it." Consequently, Eisenhower and Spaatz formed the Air Board in early 1946, with Maj. Gen. Hugh J. Knerr as its head, to consider major postwar issues and to recommend policies to the leadership.

In thinking about an independent air force and a reorganization of the national security establishment, Eisenhower was far ahead of his Army compatriots. One of the most interesting facets of Eisenhower's thoughts on unification was his description of the forces he commanded. Ike referred to

together and won the great battles in North Africa and Europe. Now they agreed that AAF should consist of three combat commands, each representing a major air mission: strategic, tactical, and air defense. (See "The Founding of the Force," September 1996, p. 62.) Eisenhower was naturally much concerned with tactical air support for the ground forces. His basic philosophy reflected the concept of mutual dependence of air and ground elements. The war had proved the effectiveness of unified command. The services and their missions were complementary. Air superiority over the battlefield was absolutely essential to successful ground operations. Eisenhower emphasized that forces operating under an air commander best gained control of the air.

The Army's Place

"The Army," Eisenhower stated, "does not belong in the air—it belongs on the ground." He noted that it was the responsibility of air forces to structure the operating establishment to support the tactical air forces. Ike's view was that airmen knew best how to organize and employ air forces. This was not all. Airmen should develop their own doctrine, bases, research and development systems, and logistics networks.

In January 1946, based on his discussions with Eisenhower, Spaatz ordered the creation of three major combat commands (Strategic Air Command, Tactical Air Command, and Air Defense Command) that reflected the fundamental air missions demonstrated during the war.

Spaatz and Eisenhower agreed that



Heavy bombing of Pantelleria (top) and the ensuing destruction (above) produced airpower's first defeat of a land force in the field. It was a dramatic demonstration of airpower.

this organization would be compatible with an independent air force, thus avoiding another postwar reorganization when independence ensued.

Lt. Gen. Elwood R. Quesada, appointed TAC commander, said Spaatz assured Eisenhower that the air force would always honor its tactical commitment to the Army. According to Quesada: "Spaatz meant it. ... He made strong promises to Eisenhower to the effect that the tactical air forces would ... honor their commitment and their obligation to provide that service to the Army."

Ike was convinced that the War Department was especially weak in one aspect of organization: "We have not kept a body free for thinking. Every-

the "three great fighting arms, ... the men and women of the United States Army, Navy, and Air."

Eisenhower already considered AAF as equal to the Army and Navy, even though the air arm was still part of the Army and the War Department. He continually made reference to "the three great coequal arms." Eisenhower's powerful experience as commander of the greatest military force ever assembled had convinced him, long before the end of the war, that the Army's air arm deserved independence.

This became evident shortly after the war in Eisenhower's compelling testimony to the Senate Military Affairs Committee. Before a packed room, the supreme commander stood before the



Eisenhower directed Spaatz (left) to pound Pantelleria with "everything we had." Spaatz did, and American and British Air Forces battered the island's Italian and German defenders until they surrendered.

committee members and immediately departed from his prepared text. The Normandy invasion "was based on a deep-seated faith in the power of the air forces in overwhelming numbers to intervene in the land battle, ... making it possible for a small force of land troops to invade a continent," he said.

"Without that air force, without the aid of its power, entirely aside from its ability to sweep the enemy air force out of the sky, without its power to intervene in the land battle, that invasion would have been fantastic." Similarly, he said, about the invasion of Salerno, Italy, "unless we had faith in the airpower to intervene and to make safe that landing, it would have been more than fantastic; it would have been criminal."

Postwar Vision

Eisenhower's vision for a postwar national security organization featured three separate service departments under unified direction in Washington. He told the committee that although he came from the ground forces, his colleagues in the air arm and Navy regarded him as one of their own. The nation's security establishment, Eisenhower stated, is "a single fighting team composed of three services."

Eisenhower's strong advocacy of an independent air force also rested on the requirement for postwar economy. This was a theme echoed by Marshall and Arnold. Eisenhower termed this the principle of the three-legged stool, as each service is dependent on the others. The nation could not afford to have each service strive for self-sufficiency.

Service competition carried too far could be "ruinous," he said. A single

department of defense was needed to preside over three coequal military services.

Eisenhower's view was upheld by President Harry S. Truman. The President recommended a Department of National Defense headed by a civilian Secretary. Unified direction of the military services was the major lesson taught by the war. In recommending a separate air force, Truman noted that "airpower has been developed to a point where its responsibilities are equal to those of land and sea power, and its contribution to our strategic planning is as great." (See "The Keeper File: 'Parity' For Airpower," March, p. 8.)

Ike made clear to the War Department General Staff that, as far as the issue of

an independent air force was concerned, "I for one can't even entertain any longer any doubt as to its wisdom." The air forces, he emphasized, proved both in Europe and the Pacific that they were equal to the land and sea forces.

The major hindrance to an independent air arm at the time came from the Navy. Secretary James V. Forrestal and the Navy leadership continued to stonewall unification, believing that the wartime system of coordination through the Joint Chiefs of Staff was good enough. Forrestal informed Truman in early 1946 that he was so opposed to a single defense department and an independent air force that "I do not believe there is any very helpful observation that I could make."

"We Should Proceed ..."

In 1946, Eisenhower informed the General Staff that within the Army he nonetheless was determined that airmen operate on an equal level with the land and naval forces. "We should proceed," Ike stated, "as if we are going to have that law with the understanding that if we don't get it, then we must go as far as we can within the legal limits to carry out the idea that the air commander and his staff are coordinate with and coequal to the land forces and the Navy."

Consequently, Eisenhower said he was prepared to elevate the Air Staff to an equal level with the War Department General Staff. Moreover, he would establish a separate air force promotion list, something the airmen had fought



Eisenhower makes a victory sign with pens used to sign Germany's unconditional surrender. By that time, he had already concluded that the Army's air arm deserved independence.



“practice unification in spirit and in action as a patriotic duty.”

Eisenhower made clear that he expected the friendly relations between air and ground personnel to continue after the Air Force was established. He stated that creation of the Air Force should serve “only to bring us closer together in friendship and performance of duty.” It was his desire that, although air personnel would no longer be strictly part of the Army, nonetheless they should be treated as members of the “Army family.” This was vintage Eisenhower, a mirror of his determination to recognize the Air Force as an integral part of the military team, based on the lessons of World War II.

Teamwork led to trust among associates of the various services. “There is

for over a long period. Also, the War Department would grant the air force “technical and professional independence” by giving it the personnel and functions now belonging to various Army technical and administrative corps and branches.

Despite the Navy’s opposition, the War Department and the Army Air Forces prevailed. With Truman increasing the pressure, Eisenhower and Spaatz discussed unification strategy. As a result, Maj. Gen. Lauris Norstad was appointed to advise a Congressional subcommittee considering unification legislation.

At this point, Eisenhower underlined his strong support for the airmen in their fight by naming Norstad as director of plans and operations for the War Department General Staff. This provided Norstad with the backing he needed to work with Vice Adm. Forrest P. Sherman, deputy chief of naval operations, in crafting legislation for the National Security Act of 1947 and also for creating the landmark Unified Command Plan.

Eisenhower’s influence and advice were paramount in these give-and-take discussions between Norstad and Sherman. The Navy wanted specific service roles and missions written into the National Security Act. Eisenhower, however, posited that this was unworkable. To succeed with an agreement, fundamental principles needed to be established. Legislation should not attempt to resolve controversial details.

“People solve problems,” Ike noted, “not organizations.” Roles and missions could subsequently be delineated by a Presidential executive order. Eisenhower’s



The major opposition to Air Force independence came from the Navy, including Secretary James Forrestal (top), but Eisenhower had convinced President Truman (shown here with his back to the camera) of the need for a separate force.

er’s strategy succeeded. The National Security Act was passed by Congress in July 1947 and signed into law by President Truman.

On July 26, 1947, the same day that Truman signed the legislation, Eisenhower signed a memo to all members of the US Army. The Army Chief emphasized that the legislation would integrate the Army, Navy, and Air Force into a “fighting team,” reflecting his long-held dedication to teamwork. Eisenhower directed “all ranks” to

no such thing,” he emphasized, “as a separate land, sea, or air war.”

Eisenhower saw creation of the United States Air Force as an enormously important segment of US national security. “I believe” he stressed, “that the airplane, from the day it was invented, has grown in importance to warfare.”

In looking back over his long career, Eisenhower considered his support for an independent Air Force as one of his greatest contributions to the nation’s security. ■

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