

With control of the skies, the Army Air Forces relentlessly pounded the Germans.

By late November 1944, Adolf Hitler's Greater German Reich was a thing of the past. That year—the year of great invasions—the Allies forced the Nazi regime on the defensive.

On land, the German Army was caught in a tightening pincer between the Anglo-American and Red armies. At sea, the Kriegsmarine's few U-boats faced annihilation from seemingly omniscient surface vessels and ocean-ranging patrol airplanes. Its once-feared capital ships had been sunk, wrecked, or stayed in the Baltic, serving as coastal artillery.

Aloft—as US Army Air Forces Gen. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold recalled—American airmen were “roving at will over all Germany, and the Luftwaffe's air and ground defenses [were] helpless to do anything about it.” Oil and transportation attacks had robbed the Nazi air service of fuel and parts, even as steady attrition cost it pilots and airplanes. No safe airspace existed anywhere, and any German airplane faced the risk of Allied fighters striking any time out of threatening skies.

Simply No Answer

From the Great Hall at the Berghof, Hitler's lofty Alpine retreat, guests looked out into nights reddened by distant burning cities. Five years of constant war had drained the Luftwaffe, exposing many weaknesses in leadership, equipment, and organization that drove two of its senior generals, Ernst Udet and Hans Jeschonnek, to suicide. In early 1944, the AAF had targeted the Luftwaffe's fighters for destruction. Generalleutnant Adolf J. F. Galland, the “General of Fighters” lost half his available airplanes in March, half of their survivors in April, and half of those that remained in May. That last month, 25 percent of his fighter pilots also perished, many of whom were veterans of combat over Spain, France, Britain, Greece, Iraq, the Western Desert, and Russia.

Consequently, on June 6, 1944, the Allies owned the air over Normandy. “From the very first moment of the invasion, the Allies had absolute air supremacy,” Galland recalled.

With control of the air, the AAF's strategic and tactical air forces (and those of the Royal Air Force as well) could concentrate on pounding German positions and forces. On D-Day alone, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower's airmen flew nearly 11,000 tactical air support sorties. Heavy and medium bombers hammered railheads, junctions, and bridges. Fighter-bombers forced Nazi troops and vehicles off roads, leading German Field Marshal Erwin J. E. Rommel to complain that “the enemy's air superiority has a very grave effect on our movements. There's simply no answer to it.”

Days later, he found the risks out for himself. Planners divided Normandy into sectors, each with a spotter that functioned much like Desert Storm's killer scouts nearly a half-century later. Cued by a Canadian Mustang recon fighter, two RAF Spitfires found and strafed Rommel's big Horch staff car, which went off the road and overturned. Gravely injured, the “Desert Fox” was out of the war. Subsequently, while convalescing, he was coerced into suicide on Oct. 14 after the Gestapo uncovered his involvement in the failed July 20, 1944, bomb plot against Hitler.

Rommel's replacement, Field Marshal Guenther A. F. von Kluge, wrote Hitler that “in the face of the total enemy air



Air Do Nor

Photo via National Museum of the US Air Force

superiority, we can adopt no tactics to compensate for the annihilating power of air except to retire from the battlefield.” He, too, committed suicide, on Aug. 18, suspecting the Gestapo had discovered his own ties to the bomb plot.

After the war, flak commander Lt. Gen. Wolfgang Pickert reported that whenever the Allies enjoyed clear skies, moving vehicles by daylight “was practically tantamount to their certain loss.” But night offered little respite, for after sunset, twin-engine AAF and RAF night intruders attacked out of the dark, blasting airfields, sup-



A swarm of Eighth Air Force B-17s fly to a target. Flying Fortresses struck marshaling yards and other interdiction targets inside Germany to deny advancing German columns fuel and other supplies.

minance From mandy to the Bulge

By Richard P. Hallion

ply points, and bridges and prowling roads and railways as well.

Tactical air commanders—AAF major generals Elwood R. Quesada, Hoyt S. Vandenberg, and Otto P. Weyland and Britain's Air Marshal Arthur Coningham and Air Vice Marshal Harry Broadhurst—made their airmen even deadlier. They had fighter-bomber pilots ride in radio-equipped tanks of advancing armored columns to control air strikes, had tactical air control parties with VHF radios assigned to infantry units, and adapted microwave early warning radar to direct strike flights and even enable blind bombing at a distance.

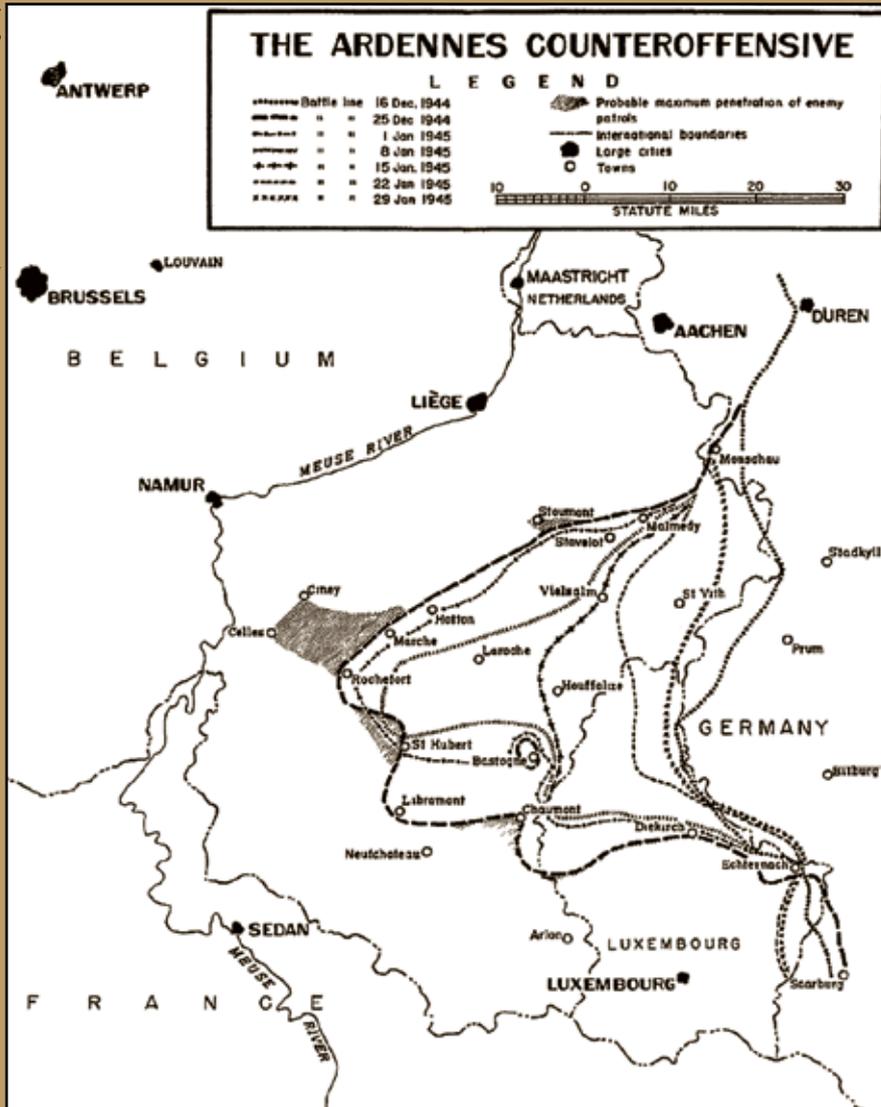
AAF and RAF fighter-bombers devastated exposed Panzers and infantry. In his after-action report, Eisenhower gave airpower chief credit for halting a Nazi armored thrust at Mortain, France, that threatened to split the invasion forces, particularly singling out the RAF's rocket-firing Typhoons. Enduring bombing, rocketing, strafing, and artillery fire controlled by airborne spotters, German troops complained with increasing exasperation, "Where is the Luftwaffe?"

At the end of the Normandy campaign, Lt. Gen. Omar N. Bradley, 12th Army Group commander—an airpower

skeptic until converted by Quesada—expressed his gratitude to Arnold, writing, "In my opinion, our close cooperation is better than the Germans ever had."

Army Maj. Gen. J. Lawton Collins, whose VII Corps began the Allied breakout across France after heavy bombing shattered German resistance in front of it, reported, "We could not possibly have gotten as far as we did, as fast as we did, and with as few casualties, without the wonderful air support that we have consistently had."

Normandy left Hitler downcast but he clung to delusions of victory. Well before the last German soldier trudged



Above: A map shows the shifting battle lines between mid-December 1944 and late January 1945. Below: A US Army machine-gun team dug in at the Ardennes, ready for the next enemy assault.

across the French frontier, Hitler had conceived a new operation, one to split the Allies, capture lost ports, and perhaps even force Britain and America into a settlement enabling Germany to continue fighting Stalin's surging Red Army. Consequently, on Aug. 19, Generaloberst Alfred J. F. Jodl, operations chief at the High Command prepared "to take the offensive in November," adding significantly, "when the enemy air forces can't operate."

Autumn Mist

Planning began immediately. The Allies pressed on all fronts—and too recklessly. The German Army always evinced a surprising ability to reconstitute, and at Arnhem, in late September, the Allies suffered a costly defeat when Operation Market Garden—an ill-conceived airborne assault—collapsed in the face of surprisingly organized and bitter resistance.

Market Garden's dismal outcome heartened Hitler and the High Command as they planned their new offensive. In 1940, German Panzers had erupted out of the thinly wooded Ardennes, launching the blitzkrieg that gained them control of the continent. Now, four-and-a-half years later, Hitler hoped for a repeat, using infiltration; deception (including fluent "American English"-speaking infiltrators in GI uniforms); and armor assault by heavy tanks—all supported by artillery, assault guns, battlefield rockets, airborne troops, infantry with anti-tank rockets and new automatic weapons, and the remnants



of the Luftwaffe, including the new Messerschmitt and Arado jets.

On Dec. 6, senior American commanders—including generals Carl A. Spaatz, George S. Patton Jr., Jimmy Doolittle, Weyland, and Vandenberg—met in Nancy, France, to discuss Operation Tink, a proposed air-land action to crack the Siegfried Line. Tink was set to launch on Dec. 19. As preparations for it went forward so, too, did Hitler's plan for his own offensive, now called *Herbstnebel*, or Autumn Mist.

Not quite a week after the Nancy meeting, Hitler met with his generals at a forward headquarters at Bad Nauheim. There, in a rambling speech, he stressed that though the Allies had "complete air superiority," the offensive would succeed. His senior commanders little shared this optimism, presciently fearing that they had too little fuel and too little protection other than weather from the potential depredations of Allied airpower.

An intense artillery barrage began the campaign in the early hours of Dec. 16. More than 20 divisions under the command of Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt fell upon four American ones strung across the snowy *Schnee Eifel*, between Monschau, Germany, and Echternach, Luxembourg. Von Rundstedt's assault achieved total surprise. Allied intelligence—including Ultra messages, other communications intercepts, aerial photography, battlefield observation, and prisoner interrogations—had reported German units moving toward the Ardennes. Unfortunately, analysts



Photo via Air Force Historical Research Agency

A US soldier examines the hulk of a German *Sturmgeschuetze* mobile assault gun, destroyed by airpower from XIX Tactical Air Command.

concluded they were buttressing the Siegfried Line, not preparing for an offensive.

Deep Into Belgium

As tanks and mechanized infantry pushed deep into Belgium, eventually forming a bulge as far west as Rochefort, a picture of impending disaster emerged. It recalled Operation Michael, the Kaiser's last-ditch 1918 offensive that nearly secured victory for Germany in the World War I. Though circumstances were vastly

different, *Herbstnebel* threatened to seriously disrupt and delay the final campaigns against the Third Reich.

Already it showcased the Nazis at their worst: At Malmedy in Belgium, SS troopers of *Kampfgruppe Peiper* massacred 84 captured GIs.

Eisenhower immediately divided the Ardennes into northern and southern sectors, the former commanded by Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery and the latter by Bradley. Quesada's airmen, who worked with Bradley's soldiers, were temporarily assigned to Coningham's Second Tactical Air Force. Coningham was a remarkable air commander and the father of Anglo-American air support doctrine and operational art. He knew Quesada from the Western Desert over a year previously and, impressed by the aggressive young airman, authorized him to apply IX Tactical Air Command's airpower as he saw fit.

In the south, Tink was delayed, then canceled. Weyland reactivated XIX TAC's mobile command post to accompany Patton, who asked for more aircraft, and to help him out, Vandenberg loaned him additional fighters and reconnaissance aircraft from Quesada's embattled IX TAC. Though these shifts triggered strong protests from both Coningham and Quesada, Vandenberg insisted the transfers stand.

On Dec. 17, 18, and 19, in steadily deteriorating flying conditions, Allied



Photo via National Museum of the US Air Force

A railroad marshaling yard near Limburg, Germany, lies in ruins, pounded into rubble by a Ninth Air Force raid on Dec. 23, 1944.



Above: Lt. Gen. Omar Bradley (l) speaks with Lt. Gen. George Patton in Bastogne, Belgium, after the successful resupply of the troops hunkered down there. **Below:** 101st Airborne Division troops watch as C-47s from the 81st Troop Carrier Squadron drop supplies into Bastogne on Dec. 26, 1944.

airmen went aloft, countering Luftwaffe raids and attacking advancing German columns. AAF fighter pilots shot down more than 125 German airplanes, while Army ground fire destroyed more than a hundred others. Though sporadic air attacks persisted, this largely ended the air threat to American ground forces, analysts subsequently noting that “despite its new aggressiveness,” the Luftwaffe

“achieved at no time and in no place even temporary air supremacy” over the Bulge.

The AAF took a heavy toll on advancing German forces over the first three days. Reviewing the record of air attack in the opening phase of the Battle of the Bulge, Bradley singled out for special praise “the offensive action of the fighter-bomber in blunting the power of the armored thrust, and

striking specific targets on the front of the ground troops.”

In one case, on the 17th, a squadron of P-47s from the 365th Fighter Group—the famous “Hell Hawks”—caught a mechanized column in the Prether River valley, destroying at least 50 of its vehicles. Elsewhere that day, Hell Hawk pilots destroyed dozens of other vehicles plus artillery. The next day, Quesada’s IX TAC destroyed approximately a hundred vehicles of various types. By the end of the following day, fighter-bombers had claimed more than 500 vehicles of all types.

Nuts!

But then the weather closed, and the ground situation immediately worsened. Now unimpeded by air attack, von Rundstedt’s forces pressed onward, racing for distance versus dwindling fuel, reaching to within five miles of the Meuse River. St. Vith fell after a heroic resistance that disrupted the Nazi timetable. At Bastogne, encircled paratroopers of the 101st Airborne and tankers from the 10th Armored Division were running low of ammunition, food, and supplies. Even so, they staved off attacks by the XLVII Panzer Corps. Army Brig. Gen. Anthony C. McAuliffe, the 101st commander, famously replied, “Nuts!” when a German emissary demanded surrender.

Dec. 23 dawned clear and crisp, signaling the beginning of a five-day period of extraordinarily good weather.

With clear skies, the vast might of Allied tactical air forces took to the air: 18 groups of fighters and bombers, and from England, the heavy bombers of Eighth Air Force. More than 600 Ninth Air Force bombers, augmented by 417 B-17s from Doolittle’s “Mighty Eighth” hammered rail and road bridges, communications centers, marshaling yards, and railheads, the heavies striking interdiction targets in Germany.

Ninth Air Force fighters launched nearly 700 sorties, some to suppress flak so that the IX Troop Carrier Command could drop 334 tons of supplies into Bastogne. Flying low to hit the lim-



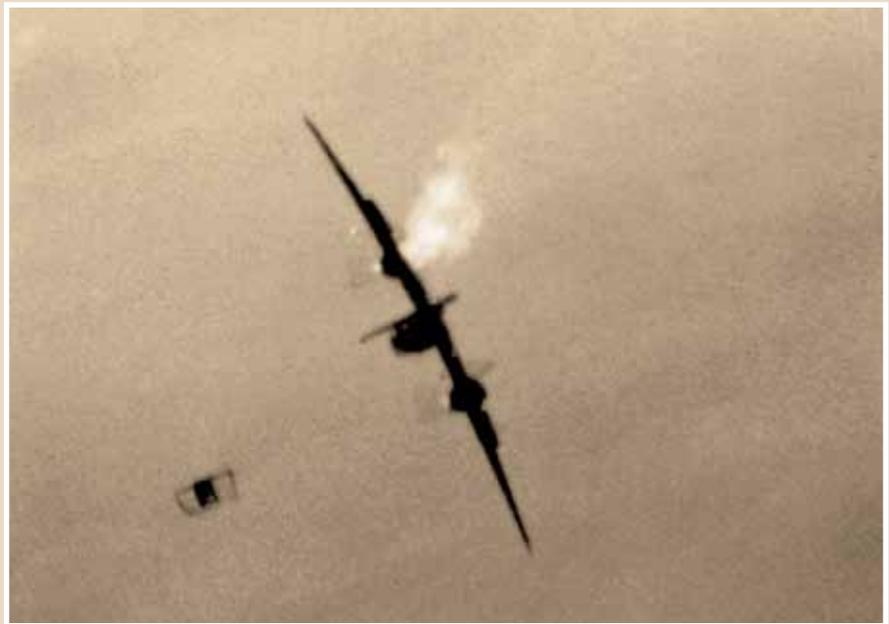
ited drop zone, the resolute airlifters and their slow C-47s ran a veritable gauntlet. The C-47s “came back with a mess of bullet holes,” Martin Wolfe of the 81st Troop Carrier Squadron recalled. “[We had] no fancy tactical planning, no elaborate flight paths this time. Just straight on in, jettison your loads over the position markers west of Bastogne, and get the hell out of there.” The airdrop stiffened both Bastogne’s resistance and the morale of its heroic defenders.

The change in weather dismayed German commanders, who knew what would follow. “From the 23rd and 24th of December on, the Allied air forces were able to operate freely,” Lt. Gen. Hasso von Manteuffel, commander of the 5 Panzerarmee, said. “They found worthwhile targets throughout the whole area of our offensive. Bomb carpets were laid down on the roads and railways behind the front, and our already inadequate supply system was throttled. The mobility of our forces decreased steadily and rapidly.”

For the five days the weather held, Allied pilots had the advantage. Late one afternoon near Houffalize, in “sparkling sunshine and unlimited visibility,” unwisely fired flak alerted patrolling Spitfires to a truck column on a narrow road; they soon left behind, as RAF Group Capt. James E. Johnson said, “a half-mile of blazing, ruined vehicles.”

Late on Dec. 26, the 4th Armored Division, capped by P-47s, reached Bastogne. Third Army’s after action report commended the transformation of Bastogne from “an isolated outpost [to] the tip of a dagger pointed at the enemy’s tactical security.” That day, Third Army reported Weyland’s fighter pilots destroyed almost 450 vehicles, while bomber crews cut 14 rail lines and bombed three marshaling yards.

By then the offensive was running out of fuel, both because of its scarcity and because Allied air attacks had destroyed numerous fuel trucks. After the war, Bradley’s 12th Army Group Air Effects Committee reported that Generalleutnant Fritz Bayerlein “particularly noted the disastrous and calculated selection of fuel tank trucks as fighter-bomber targets. He and others have vivid memories of precious forward gasoline dumps lost through air attack.” In one case reported by Bradley’s committee, the destruction by an anonymous Allied fighter-bomber of just a single tanker



A battle camera catches the last moments of a Messerschmitt Me 410 shot down in 1944. In a rambling speech in December 1944, Hitler complained the Allies had “complete air superiority.” He was right.

carrying three tons of gasoline sufficed to prevent an SS Panzer division from seizing Liege, Belgium. Certainly, the combination of fuel and interdiction attacks destroyed German mobility, dooming the offensive to eventually come to a halt. By year’s end, it was spent.

A Unanimous Verdict

Many more bitter months of fighting remained before war’s end, but the Bulge had constituted the Wehrmacht’s last offensive gasp. On Jan. 1, the Luftwaffe launched one final mass assault in a desperate bid to stave off the inevitable. Though careful planning kept it secret until German fighters appeared over Allied airfields, it caused more disruption than destruction, and the losses in Luftwaffe men and aircraft were, at this point, hopelessly irreplaceable. Going into the new year, the Allies had every prospect for success, not failure.

After the war, German generals were unanimous that airpower played the most significant role in their defeat. The Air Effects Committee said von Rundstedt told interrogators the main reason for the failure of the Ardennes offensive was his own lack of fighters, i.e., the Luftwaffe’s failure to control the air. The 5 Panzerarmee’s F. W. von Mellenthin believed “the

Ardennes battle drives home the lesson that a large-scale offensive by massed armor has no hope of success against an enemy who enjoys supreme command of the air.” They and others concurred that “when mobility and maneuver are lost, the loss of battles and campaign follows,” reported the Air Effects Committee.

After the war, the committee summed up countless interrogations of Nazi personnel, concluding, “From the high command to the soldier in the field, German opinion has been agreed that airpower was the most striking aspect of Allied superiority.”

Allied air supremacy enabled the cross-channel invasion of Europe, the breakout across France, and prevented a war-lengthening disaster in the Ardennes. More than this, it played the essential role in defeating Hitler’s regime.

On March 21, 1945, sitting in his increasingly squalid quarters, daily threatened with AAF bombing and harassed at night by droning RAF Mosquitos, Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s propaganda minister, confided details of a conversation he had with der Fuehrer: “Again and again,” he wrote in his diary, “we return to the starting point of our conversation. Our whole military predicament is due to enemy air superiority.” ■

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