

# AIR POWER IN THE INVASION

**'If you see a plane it will be ours.' It was up to 31,000 airmen to make good that promise on D-day. They did.**

**By Cable from AIR FORCE Staff  
Correspondents in the ETO**

**I**NSIDE the metal skins of hundreds of C-17s, soot-faced paratroopers knelt in final prayer. Standing beside their fragile craft, glider pilots checked their watches as the minutes ticked away toward midnight. On the Channel coast, civilians felt their beds rock and houses shudder as the RAF hurled down on ten Nazi gun emplacements the heaviest night bomb load of the war. All day long, Lightnings had patrolled the Straits, guarding ship movements from hostile eyes. Now the great armada was well under way, a thousand phosphorescent wakes gleaming under clouded skies. At bomber and fighter stations all over England, lights burned behind guarded doors as the last secret orders came in. Weeks of tension were building to a final climax. This was it; this was D-day.

Shortly before midnight, three airborne divisions were on their way—the American 82nd and 101st and the British 6th. At six minutes past midnight, one great sky serpent, nine planes wide and 200 miles long, thrust its head across the enemy-held coast. Ten minutes later the lead plane of the 9th Troop Carrier Command's Pathfinder group was over the designated drop zone. Lights by the open door of the Skytrain winked red and then green. Carrying radio equipment that would greatly facilitate navigation for succeeding aircraft, the first stick of paratroopers tumbled into the flak-streaked darkness. The time was 0016 June 6, 1944. The liberation of Europe from the west had begun.

Almost unchallenged the great procession swung back toward its base. As the head recrossed the English coast, the

tail was still going out, roaring across the choppy Channel at 300 feet. As each section of the body passed over Cherbourg Peninsula at a slightly increased altitude, hundreds of parachutes blossomed in the gusty air. Some came down through clouds that hung as low as 500 feet. As fast as they hit the ground, the paratroopers seized key positions and began clearing the landing areas of obstructions left by the Germans. Gliders came spiraling down—British Hamilcars and Horsas and the smaller American CG-1As—carrying fighting troops, ammunition, land mines, field artillery, jeeps, medical supplies and even complete radio stations in some cases. The heavy Horsas actually mowed down German obstacles. The giant Hamilcars, with greater wingspread than a Lancaster, disgorged tanks. Some cracked up but still delivered cargoes. Later the Germans complained bitterly about the Allied use of dummy paratroops. One American glider landed by mistake on a roof, spilling out a combat team who promptly captured the village. Others were briefed to land directly on top of gun positions, silence the gun crews and get away before the Allied bombers returned to the job. They did.

**T**HE losses among the Skytrains, flying unarmed and unescorted at less than 1,000 feet, were astonishingly light. The Americans lost only 26 aircraft out of almost 1,000 dispatched, a bargain price to pay for the achievement of landing two crack divisions behind the Atlantic Wall. All the lessons learned in the dangerous night exercises during the past weeks in Britain were brilliantly applied.

The 9th Air Force's Troop Carrier Command could well be proud of the night's work.

By the time the Skytrains were back at base, preparing to fly reinforcements to the men they had dropped, the daylight forces were being briefed for the greatest air effort in history. Everything was going to be thrown in, from heavies to fighters. "You needn't worry about the air," the Supreme Commander had said to his assault troops a few hours before. "If you see a plane it will be ours." It was up to the airmen to make good that promise. Before 0800 hours on D-day, 31,000 of them had helped make it a reality.

Actually, General Eisenhower's prediction, the highest possible tribute to Allied air power, had been made possible by months of unending work on the ground and unceasing heroism in the air. Factory workers in America and Britain were partly responsible, so were American aircrews who flew from Italy to blast German fighter factories in Austria. Ground crews in Britain, working eighteen hours or more each day to keep the planes in the air, shared credit equally with the men who scored the air victories. It was the sum total of the effort that counted.

It would be absurd at this stage of the game to attempt to evaluate air power's contribution to the initial success of the invasion. But looking back over the months that preceded D-day, a certain orderly and logical sequence of achievements can be discerned. First of all, the Luftwaffe was forced back into Germany. This was primarily the contribution of the heavy bombers of the 8th Air Force and the fighter escorts who dealt such terrible

blows to the war-making capacity of the Reich and to the Reich itself that Hitler was forced to husband his dwindling air strength to protect the Homeland. Medium bombers and fighters of the 9th Air Force and the RAF's 2nd Tactical Air Force also deserved credit for making the coastal airdromes too hot for the Luftwaffe to use with any comfort. But it was primarily strategic pressure on Das Vaterland and the steadily dwindling aircraft reserves that cost Jerry all hope of contesting the air over the beaches as he had done at Dieppe.

Once this forced withdrawal of the enemy air force was accomplished, Allied airmen were able to turn their attention to the network of communications on which the Germans relied to supply the armies of the Atlantic Wall. Heavies, mediums, light bombers and fighters of both the RAF and AAF, hammered marshalling yards, junctions, tunnels and bridges into a state of chaos. By D-day, out of twenty-four railway bridges and fourteen road bridges across the Seine between Paris and the sea, all but one railroad bridge and five highway bridges were knocked out. By D-day plus one, they were all destroyed. The effect on Rommel's ability to shift troops quickly can easily be imagined. And the onslaught against rolling stock and road traffic never ceased.

THE pre-invasion function of air power was to observe as much as possible of enemy preparations while denying him the benefits of photo-reconnaissance. In endless sorties, Allied photo planes obtained coverage of the entire enemy-held coastline. At low tide they photographed the steel obstructions planted by the Germans to repel landing craft. Inland they kept a watchful photographic eye on the progress of the anti-glider and anti-paratroop installations. Our fighter sweeps were unable completely to prevent German photo-reconnaissance, especially at night, but restricted it to a point where the Germans obviously were kept guessing.

The fourth and perhaps supreme tactical contribution of Allied air power was the blitz on German coastal defenses themselves for weeks before D-day. Bombers poured an endless stream of high explosives on naval guns—155mm and 170mm—housed in steel and concrete emplacements. On the night before D-day, the RAF dropped 5,000 tons on ten of these crucial batteries in the area between Le Havre and Cherbourg—more tonnage per battery than London ever received at one time during the height of the blitz. At dawn 1,300 American heavies took over where the RAF left off. As a result, the gunfire greeting the seaborne forces was much weaker than expected. The great guns on our battleships could and did silence the shore guns still able

to fire, but the fact that early reports indicated only two destroyers and one LST sunk out of an armada of 4,000 ships shows how thoroughly the way had been prepared.

To thousands of American airmen in Britain, the first warning that H-hour was at hand came when iron security regulations were clamped down on stations, guards were doubled, briefing room doors were locked and no one was allowed to leave. Post visitors were not told of the alert until after they were admitted and then found that they could not leave. In some cases, this sequestration led to awkward situations. At one fighter station, presumably unadorned by any Wacs, the harassed supply officer was pestered by indignant female hostages to provide certain items which he never before in all his Army career had been called upon to produce. At another base, the local vicar arrived in high dudgeon to demand the release of several young women of his parish who, he said, were not adequately chaperoned. They were not released. A farmer, finding the village veterinarian was among those interned, wistfully drove a sick cow up to the gate. The sentry informed him that the cow could be treated only inside the fence and that it would have to stay there. At another station two innocent passersby, who displayed mild curiosity at the blue and white zebra stripes with which all invasion aircraft were feverishly being painted, were enticed inside and held.

Probably the first four-engine American aircraft to participate in the invasion plan were six Fortresses that dropped leaflets warning the French of the storm about to break. Long before any daylight, hundreds of heavies and mediums were airborne, some taking off by moonlight. D-day had been postponed 24 hours to let the weather improve but it was still far from perfect. Through breaks in the clouds, crews of the heavies caught glimpses of the sea armada far below. Some claimed that their bombers were rocked even at that altitude by the concussion of naval broadsides being fired across the beaches.

MARAUDERS, flying lower than on any occasion since their disastrous debut in the ETO, had a better view than anybody. They saw tanks crawling ashore to engage the enemy, fields filled with the wreckage of gliders, bomb-pocked ground littered with parachutes. Fighters, never less than 200 feet over the beachheads, prowled restlessly up and down looking for the Luftwaffe. On the whole they were disappointed. Goering had issued a statement to the effect that the invasion had to be repulsed even if the Luftwaffe perished in the effort, but apparently the Luftwaffe was not ready for a showdown. Barely fifty enemy planes were seen in the battle area all day. Four of the twelve

JU-88s that made a pass at one of the beachheads were destroyed. With approximately 10,000 Allied sorties being flown, the odds against the Luftwaffe were 200 to 1. The Supreme Commander was right: the assault troops did not have to worry about the air.

All through D-day endless air processions went on. The 8th Air Force flew over 4,300 sorties; this was as many battle flights in one day as the 8th Air Force had completed in its first seven months of operations over Europe. The 9th chalked up better than 4,800 and the RAF's 2nd Tactical Air Force recorded some 2,000. It is probable that in the first 24 hours more than 13,000 battle flights were flown. When the late summer darkness descended, the Allied night fighters took up patrols and shot down twelve enemy aircraft that attempted to attack the beaches.

Air opposition stiffened slightly the next day. Air losses were even—both sides losing 23. For the Allies, however, this represented only a tiny fraction of the total forces engaged. By noon of D-day plus two, only 289 aircraft were missing of some 27,000 sorties flown—an overall loss ratio of barely one percent. Meanwhile, the Luftwaffe lost 176.

THE close support afforded by the tactical air forces during the first three days was magnificent. The Marauders, sometimes flying three missions a day at whatever altitude the weather permitted, added their bombweight to the naval bombardment of the stubborn German stronghold of Caen. Bomb-carrying P-47s pinpointed the troublesome gun positions and silenced them. Four 9th Air Force groups were singled out for special commendation by a spokesman representing General Montgomery. Meanwhile, 1,000 American heavies blasted airfields in a wide arc around the battle zone. General Eisenhower referred to "the long and brilliant campaign conducted in the past months by the combined air forces." It had been, he said, an essential preliminary to invasion and he congratulated the airmen on keeping up the good work. Other Allied leaders agreed that the air support was all that could be desired.

On Friday, June 9, the uncertain weather became so bad that all Allied air activity ceased. This respite gave the Germans a chance to bring up badly needed supplies and hindered the landing of our own. The communications of both sides, to a large extent, were at the mercy of the weather, but what was favorable to one handicapped the other. Bad weather tended to bottleneck Allied supplies on the beaches. Good weather closed the stranglehold of Allied air superiority around Rommel's throat.

On Saturday, when the skies cleared somewhat, our planes found the roads behind the enemy lines choked with rein-

forcements. They took up strafing where they had left off on Thursday. Marauders flew in as low as 200 feet. One came back with a fragment of its own bombs lodged in the wing. Twenty-eight enemy aircraft were destroyed that day; twenty-six of ours were lost. Sunday was the same story except that our losses were even lighter and the Luftwaffe more elusive than ever.

By Saturday, emergency landing strips were being used by Allied planes running short of fuel or suffering battle damage. Sites for these landing strips were chosen before the invasion troops left England. Engineers had landed on D-day and bulldozers followed that night. The first strip had been carved out of a corn field under sniper fire and was ready for action by Friday afternoon.

By Monday a Spitfire wing was in full operation and air evacuation of the wounded by transport plane had begun. With the Troop Carrier Command's great fleet of Skytrains virtually intact, supply by air may assume great importance as airdromes are captured farther inland.

As these words are written, on the morning of June 12, D-day plus six, the German Air Force has yet to put in an appearance. Rommel seems to be committing his reserves piecemeal but they are battling without benefit of air power. Germany certainly has enough front line air strength left to make a fight of it for a limited time at least, but so far she is

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either unable or unwilling to do so. Probably both. Airfields near the battle zone are likely to prove death traps for grounded aircraft. Besides, if the Luftwaffe moves its limited fighter strength forward, American heavies will smash targets left unprotected in the Reich. Already since D-day, Italian-based Fortresses and Liberators in great strength have attacked factories in Austria. The Nazis are in the unhappy position of a boxer with only one hand to guard himself. If he tries to protect his face, he risks a knockout blow in the solar plexus.

Rommel may be saving his air strength for all-out counterattack. If so, British and American fighters are more than ready for him. With Rome fallen to the Allies, with shuttle bombing to Russia from Italian bases an established fact, with the Soviet steam roller beginning to move into Finland, with the last Rumanian oil refineries smashed, the Nazi's plight is an unenviable one.

As one of their own newspapers put it, the success of the Allied invasion "would simply mean the end."

With that Teutonic wail of defeatism, no one seemed likely to disagree. ☆

**AIR FORCE, July, 1944**