



AIR PINCERS OVER EUROPE

By Maj. Arthur Gordon
AIR FORCE Overseas Staff

HISTORY may well disclose that the last stand of the German Air Force began in February, 1944. An air arm which cannot supply itself with replacements is doomed. In February, Nazi fighter production received such a hammering from the air that, for the first time, it failed to keep pace with the attrition of the Luftwaffe.

Those who like precise dates may choose either February 20 or 22 as a critical moment. On February 20 the greatest daylight aerial assault in history was launched from Britain. Nearly 2,000 planes of the 8th and 9th Air Forces struck the German aircraft industry in eight widely separated areas. The next day another great force continued the attack. On the third day, bombers of the 15th Air Force roared up from the Mediterranean to add their bomb tonnage to the weight being dropped simultaneously by the British-based heavies.

This closing of aerial pincers was the final outcome of long planning and careful preparation on the part of the U. S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe. To any

thoughtful German, it must have looked like the handwriting on the wall. In these three days, with more than 4,000 American aircraft attacking, with American heavies dropping over 5,000 tons of bombs and with the RAF adding some 3,000 more at night, the air war over Europe moved into its most violent phase.

One hundred and seventeen American aircraft—94 bombers and 23 fighters—were lost; 310 enemy fighters were reported destroyed in the air, plus a considerable number on the ground. Weary from combatting the RAF's shattering night attacks on Leipzig and Stuttgart during the same period, the Luftwaffe fought back with its usual skill and courage but showed definite signs of grogginess. At USSTAF headquarters, staff officers, who remembered a similar climax in July, 1943, prayed for a few days of clear skies. "Give us the weather," they said, "and our combat crews will finish the job."

It was back in February, 1942, that the first AAF officers arrived in Britain. A year later, in February, 1943, the

American air effort in Europe was still pathetically small. The 8th Air Force consisted of about a half-dozen groups of heavy bombers, and when they managed to put 100 planes over a target in Germany, it was without any fighter escort.

Now the picture has been altered so radically that it is not easy to focus it clearly. The expansion has been so great that the result at first glance seems to be a bewildering jumble of British and American air power, of strategic and tactical and expeditionary air forces whose names are likely to change overnight and whose operational and administrative affiliations defy analysis.

Such is not actually the case. The organization wherein the 8th, 9th and 15th Air Forces are cooperating with one another and with the RAF in the pre-invasion softening of Germany is practical and very much to the point. It is still, however, in a state of crystalization and further changes are to be expected.

The backbone of American air power in Europe is the 8th Air Force, whose

fighter and heavy bomber commands now match the RAF in size and striking power. Under command of Maj. Gen. James H. Doolittle, the 8th Air Force now forms one wing—the British-based wing—of Lieut. Gen. Carl Spaatz' Strategic Air Force. The other wing of the USSTAF is the 15th Air Force, based in Italy, under the command of Maj. Gen. Nathan Twining. General Spaatz exercises operational control of the 15th Air Force through the Mediterranean Allied Air Force, under Lieut. Gen. Ira C. Eaker, but the distance from Britain makes administrative control difficult and much of this remains in the Mediterranean.

The combined operations of these two air forces against German aircraft factories on February 22 were initiated at General Spaatz' headquarters in Britain, and they provided the first example of how these two spearheads will function as one weapon, bringing the pressure of strategic bombing to bear on the enemy from opposite directions. Our tactical air power in Britain is wrapped up in the plans of the invasion forces, all under command of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme-Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces. The Supreme Headquarters of the latter is referred to as SHAEF.

Directly under SHAEF is the Allied

How our air organization in the ETO is drawing the noose around the Luftwaffe.

Expeditionary Air Forces. AEAFF is the joint British-American force under command of Air Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, with Maj. Gen. William O. Butler as deputy. Its mission will be to furnish air cover and support for the forthcoming invasion of Fortress Europe.

Currently, the AEAFF is composed of two tactical air forces, the British 2nd and the American 9th. The official announcement on February 18 that the 9th was in Britain surprised practically no one, inasmuch as shoulder patches of personnel had been visible for weeks all over England. Well known as the air force whose tactical aircraft harassed Rommel across the sands of Africa and whose heavies struck the Ploesti oil fields last summer, the 9th retains some of its old personnel. Its commander is still Maj. Gen. Lewis H. Brereton; its bombers are mediums taken over from what used to be the 8th Air Force Air Support Command. In addition, it is rapidly building up a powerful striking force of attack bombers, fighter-bombers and fighters. It includes a Troop

Carrier Command with paratroops and gliders carrying Airborne Infantry, all in a state of pre-invasion training.

Not that the 9th has been content with waiting for D-day. During the intervening months its B-26s have struck across the Channel as often as weather would permit, blasting Nazi airdromes and marshalling yards and concentrating particularly on military installations which Prime Minister Churchill finally identified as emplacements for rockets or glider bombs. Marauder losses have been very low—eighteen bombers in approximately 7,500 sorties—thanks to close support from RAF Spitfires and the fact that the bulk of German fighters have been forced back to defend Germany proper. In addition, the 9th has been sending out long-range, hard-hitting P-51s and P-47s to escort the 8th Air Force heavy bombers and furnish target support on deep penetration missions. One Mustang group in 28 combat missions has destroyed 115 enemy fighters with a loss of only 19 Mustangs, outmaneuvering and outfighting every type of German fighter at altitudes ranging from practically zero to more than 25,000 feet.

Despite the valuable contributions made by the Marauders and long-range fighter escorts provided by the 9th, the salient feature of the winter air offensive has

been the Allied effort to smash the German Air Force by crippling its production centers on the ground. In the early days of the 8th Air Force's activities, much was made of the spectacular claims of fighters destroyed by bombers in aerial combat. This attrition of the Luftwaffe was undeniably valuable but the emphasis was misplaced. As long as the Germans could make good their losses—and total German twin-engined and single-engined fighter strength was steadily rising—they could afford their casualties. What they could not afford was serious damage to their fighter factories, sheltered for the most part deep within the Reich.

On January 11 the grand assault began with daylight attacks on Oschersleben, Brunswick, Halberstadt and other key production centers. The cost was heavy that day—59 bombers—but the Allied Command was willing to pay an even higher price if necessary, to break the Luftwaffe's back. In the next six weeks the bombing blows seriously crippled more than fifty percent of the German factories that were producing Nazi fighters on January 11. This was the most significant aspect of the air war, perhaps of the war itself. This was the goal toward which the AAF and RAF had been pointing for more than two years. This was the realization of detailed plans made months before—plans that had been awaiting the necessary planes and weather before they could be carried out.

Losses during these six weeks were not as heavy as expected. Through February 22, 8th Air Force heavy bomber losses were 2.2 percent of aircraft dispatched. This compared favorably with the overall loss of 3.1 percent of all aircraft dispatched since the first operational mission of August 17, 1942. It compared brilliantly with the worst month, when losses ranged over 6 percent. For the same period, February 1 through 22, our fighter losses were 0.8 percent as against an overall figure of 0.7 percent. Considering the fact that in the first 22 days of February more sorties had been flown by the 8th than in any previous full month—nearly all of them deep penetration missions—losses were astonishingly light.

There were three main reasons for this.



Lieut. Gen. Carl Spaatz



Maj. Gen. William O. Butler

One was the immense and cumulative strain on the Luftwaffe. An exchange of letters between Air Marshal Harris and General Spaatz corroborated this growing weakness. The RAF lost 79 aircraft in a terrific battle over Leipzig on the night of February 19-20. On the following day, with our main attack centering in the same area, American losses were only twenty-one. That night the RAF attacked Stuttgart in great strength, losing only ten. Obviously German defenses were stretched to the breaking point.

The other two reasons were the increasing skill and experience of bomber crews and the inestimable value of long-range fighter escort, with hundreds of P-47s, P-38s and P-51s shepherding the bombers, usually providing complete cover to and from the most heavily defended targets and target support as well. German fighter attacks on bomber boxes could not develop to any effective degree. More and more, German defensive tactics seemed to call for the use of twin-engined rocket-carrying fighter-bombers—ME-110s, ME-210s, ME-410s, JU-88s and JU-188s. These aircraft, standing out of range of the bombers' machine guns, attempted to cripple Fortresses or Liberators by lobbing rocket projectiles into formations; then ME-109s and FW-190s would jump stragglers.

Rocket carriers proved no match for our fighters. One reason for the amazing score registered by Mustangs, Thunderbolts and Lightnings—better than four-to-one in some groups—was the fact that unless rocket carriers were provided with top cover of their own they were shot down in droves. The air war was resolving itself into a devil's merry-go-round where rocket carriers attacked our bombers, our fighters attacked the rocket carriers, and German fighters awaited a chance to pounce on crippled airplanes whenever the opportunity presented itself.

The only conclusion possible to a close observer during the last part of February was that the Allied air chiefs were going all out for the kill. Not even the urgent requirements of the Anzio beach head were being permitted to interfere with the planned destruction of the Luftwaffe in the air and in the nest.

Once the curve of German fighter production started downward—and it has started—it was imperative to maintain the pressure; to give the Germans no breathing space, such as they were granted last summer, in which to rest tired men and rebuild shattered factories.

Every lesson of modern warfare points to one inescapable conclusion: mastery of the skies is a prerequisite to the invasion of Europe. As these words are written, somewhere in England, that mastery is being achieved. ☆

Lieut. Gen. Ira C. Eaker

Maj. Gen. Lewis H. Brereton

Maj. Gen. James H. Doolittle

Maj. Gen. Nathan Twining

