

TARGETING TH

When Spaatz and Doolittle changed the fighter strategy, it was the beginning of the end for German airpower in western Europe.

By John T. Correll

In January 1944, the new commander of Eighth Air Force, Maj. Gen. James H. Doolittle, was visiting his subordinate commander, Maj. Gen. William A. Kepner, at VIII Fighter Command, when he noticed a slogan on the wall.

It read: "The first duty of Eighth Air Force fighters is to bring the bombers back alive." Kepner said the sign was there when he got there. Doolittle told him to take it down, that it was wrong.

A new sign went up: "The first duty of Eighth Air Force fighters is to destroy German fighters."

This was considerably more than a moment of fighter pilot bravado. It marked a key change in strategy in the air war in Europe.

"As far as I'm concerned, this was the most important and far-reaching military decision I made during the



Lt. Gen. James Doolittle sent USAAF's fighters after the Luftwaffe.

war." Doolittle said. "It was also the most controversial."

The fighters were no longer constrained to holding close formation with bombers. Instead, they would fly ahead, look for German fighters, and attack them where they found them.

Bomber crews were dismayed at first, but the results were dramatic. Within a few months, the Allies had seized air superiority from the Germans and held

it for the rest of the war. The average monthly loss rate for Eighth Air Force heavy bombers fell from 5.1 percent in 1943 to 1.9 percent in 1944.

It was part of a broader plan by Lt. Gen. Carl A. "Tooey" Spaatz, commander of US Strategic Air Forces in Europe (USSTAF) to destroy the Luftwaffe. Spaatz deliberately used the bombers as bait. By attacking the German oil supplies, they would lure the Luftwaffe up into direct combat, where US fighters waited for them. German airpower would be destroyed by attrition.

The Luftwaffe managed a recovery of sorts later in the year, but its losses in the spring of 1944 were of critical importance. On D-Day, June 6, the Allied invasion force was strung out for miles along the Normandy coast, presenting the greatest target of the war for German airpower. The Luftwaffe

E LUFTWAFFE



Fighters leave curving contrails while escorting a B-17 bomber on a mission over Germany in 1943.



Lt. Gen. Carl Spaatz steps out of a B-17 in England in 1944. Spaatz joined Doolittle in reimagining the role of fighters and bombers in World War II.

was unable to mount opposition of any significance.

The Spaatz-Doolittle strategy also demonstrated the error of pre-war theories—strongly held by Air Corps leaders, including Henry H. “Hap” Arnold and Spaatz—about the relative

roles of bombers and fighters and how they could best operate together.

THE BOMBER ASSUMPTION

Between the world wars, “the task of formulating doctrine fell largely to the faculty of the old Air Corps Tactical

School,” said military historian I. B. Holley Jr. “In the early years, when the memory of World War I was still fresh in everyone’s mind, the boys in the bomber branch displayed considerable realism in their thinking. When they projected long-range strategic bombardment missions, they visualized fighter escorts going along to fend off enemy attacks. This view persisted at least down to 1930, but thereafter the picture changed radically.”

The new Martin B-10 bomber could outfly the older fighters. The B-17 and the B-24 were even faster and flew at altitudes too high for most pursuit aircraft to catch them. The revised doctrine from the Tactical School was that bombers could penetrate air defenses with acceptable losses so that fighter escorts were not necessary.

“Gradually, it became an article of faith with the enthusiasts that the

THE FIGHTERS

Within a few months, the Eighth Air Force fighter force rose from

274
to
882.

Long-range P-51 fighters and larger fuel tanks enabled the fighters, including P-38s and P-47s, to go as far as Berlin.

bomber was invulnerable,” Holley said.

In tests at March Field, California, in 1933, Lt. Col. Arnold demonstrated that P-26 fighters were seldom able to intercept B-10 and B-12 bombers. In his view, fighters of the future would rarely be a threat to bombers. In any role, pursuit aircraft would be of limited value.

Among those challenging Arnold’s conclusions was Capt. Claire L. Chennault, an instructor in fighter tactics at the Tactical School. Arnold responded to Chennault’s rebuttal with a note asking, “Who is this damned fellow Chennault?”

Arnold was the foremost advocate of the bomber. By 1938, he was a two-star general and Chief of the Air Corps. His principal disciples were Spaatz and Ira C. Eaker. Chennault left the Air Corps and went to China, where he led the fighters of the American Volunteer Group—the Flying Tigers—for Chiang Kai-shek.

Fighters were a secondary consideration in pre-war research and development. In 1940, the standard Air Corps fighter was the P-40, outclassed by the best German, British, and Japanese fighters. In 1939 and again in 1941, the Air Corps rejected proposals for auxiliary fuel tanks to give tactical aircraft, including escort fighters, greater range. Drop tanks, it was held, would add weight for no good purpose.

In any case, escort fighters were not supposed to be off chasing enemy aircraft. Army Air Forces Field Manual 1-15, *Tactics and Technique of Air Fighting*, said in April 1942 the mission

of close escorts “precludes their seeking to impose combat on other forces except as necessary to carry out their defensive role.”

THE CONCEPT GOES TO WAR

When the United States entered World War II, Lt. Gen. Arnold was chief of the Army Air Forces. In 1942, Maj. Gen. Spaatz went to Britain as commander of Eighth Air Force, with Brig. Gen. Eaker as commander of VIII Bomber Command under Spaatz.

The B-17s flew their first mission from England in August 1942 with limited escort from the Royal Air Force. American pilots from VIII Fighter Command took over the job in October, flying short-range British Spitfires that

could go no further than Antwerp in Belgium.

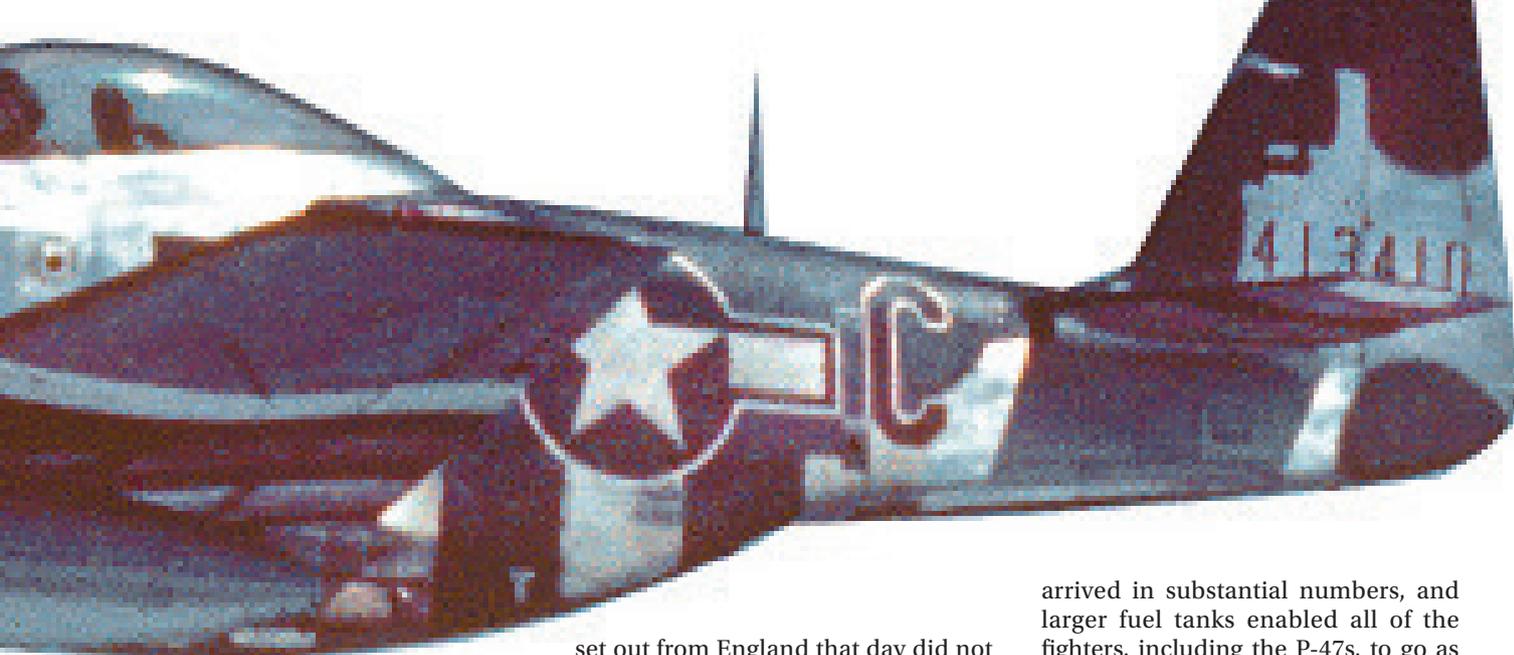
Eaker was not particularly worried about that. “Our bombing experience to date indicates that the B-17 with its 12 .50-caliber guns can cope with the German day fighter, if flown in close formation,” he said in October. “I think it is safe to say that a large force of day bombers can operate without fighter cover against material objectives anywhere in Germany, without excessive losses.”

Operations against occupied Europe had barely begun when the Allied strategic focus shifted—at British insistence—to North Africa. The key commanders went there, including Spaatz.

Eaker was promoted to major gen-



Three B-17s are attacked by a German fighter (top, center) during a 1944 mission.



eral and took over Eighth Air Force in December 1942 when Spaatz was put in command of US air units in North Africa. Aircraft and pilots were transferred from Eighth Air Force to form Twelfth Air Force in Africa.

As bomber missions into western Europe increased, losses rose at an alarming rate. “In the late spring of 1943, Arnold’s staff had determined that the ‘self-defending’ bomber was incapable of defending itself against German attacks,” said historian Steven L. McFarland. The AAF School of Applied Tactics, successor to the Tactical School, “was teaching its students that escort was essential to successful bombardment as early as March 1943.”

The first P-47 fighters arrived in Britain in April to escort the B-17s. In July, they were outfitted with drop tanks, giving them enough fuel to reach the German border. Bombers were seven times more likely to be shot down if they were not accompanied by fighters.

By summer, close escort was the standard practice. Initially, the fighters flew as top cover but then moved down into closer formation beside and in front of the bombers to better meet the Luftwaffe attack. The P-47s had to weave and limit their speed to keep pace with the slower bombers.

Whatever fragment of credibility that remained for the Tactical School bomber concept was swept away by stunning losses over Schweinfurt and Regensburg that fall. For the Schweinfurt mission Oct. 14, the P-47 escorts turned back just inside the German border, whereupon the Luftwaffe attacked in large numbers from all directions. One of every five B-17s that

set out from England that day did not return.

For the rest of the year, Eighth Air Force struck only targets that were within range of the escort fighters. “The fact was that the Eighth Air Force had, for the time being, lost air superiority over Germany,” the official AAF history said. In October, Eaker declared the primary role of fighters to be support for the heavy bombers.

When bomber crews completed 25 missions, they got credit for a combat tour and went home, but in late 1943, the odds were against their doing so. Before reaching that mark, 57 percent of them would be dead or missing.

The terrible losses were not the only problem. In December, Arnold warned that unless the German Air Force was destroyed, Operation Overlord—the D-Day invasion coming up in June 1944—would not be possible.

PRESSING THE ATTACK

Preparations for Overlord brought wholesale changes. Spaatz returned to England as commander of US Strategic Air Forces in Europe. Doolittle came with him as the new commander of Eighth Air Force, replacing Eaker who was promoted to lieutenant general and sent to command the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces.

Eaker never had enough bombers to achieve the results asked of him, nor did he have enough fighters—or the right kind of fighters—to provide real protection for the bombers. By contrast, with Overlord on the horizon, Doolittle was flooded with resources.

Within a few months and despite attrition, operational bombers in Eighth Air Force increased from 461 to 1,655 and the fighter force rose from 274 to 882. Long-range P-38 and P-51 fighters

arrived in substantial numbers, and larger fuel tanks enabled all of the fighters, including the P-47s, to go as far as Berlin.

That—and Arnold’s mandate to destroy the Luftwaffe—set the stage for Doolittle’s order to Kepner in January 1944 to go after the German fighters. By the end of January, the escorts had spread out into formations 25 miles wide with a squadron out front, sweeping the route for enemy aircraft. Soon entire groups of fighters were ranging 50 miles ahead to catch the German interceptors on the ground or as they were forming up to attack the bombers.

At the same time, the Spaatz strategy focused the bomber attacks on two critical elements of the German war industry: aircraft factories and synthetic oil plants. This compelled the Luftwaffe to stay closer to home in a defensive mode rather than venturing afield to intercept the bombers. It also required them to come up and fight the P-38s and P-51s, which were tough opponents.

British Air Chief Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory, the Allied air chief for Overlord, disagreed vigorously. He wanted to hold back the fighters for training and the big air battle he anticipated on D-Day. He thought the primary target for the bombers should be German rail centers and marshaling yards.

The supreme Allied commander, US Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, settled the priorities with consideration for British sensitivities. Spaatz got most, but not all, of what he wanted. However, it was enough.

The ensuing operations, especially the concentrated attacks during “Big Week” in February, dealt the Luftwaffe a blow from which it never fully recovered. The Luftwaffe in western Europe wrote off 34 percent of its fighter strength in January, another 56 percent in February. Production of Bf 109 and Fw 190 fighters contin-

A German Me 262 fighter being shot down by an Eighth Air Force P-51—as seen from the P-51's gun camera—in January 1945.



ued but did not make up for the attrition. Supplies of aviation fuel dropped from 180,000 tons in April to 50,000 tons in July and 10,000 tons in August.

Thanks to the genius of Hitler's armaments minister, Albert Speer, the Germans would eventually replenish most of their aircraft losses. They would not be able to replace the veteran pilots lost, though, and the new fighters would sit idle on the ramp for lack of fuel.

ON FROM OVERLORD

The Allies had absolute air supremacy on D-Day. The battle over the beaches predicted by Leigh-Mallory did not happen. The Luftwaffe in France could launch only 70 fighter sorties on the first day of the Normandy invasion and another 175 that night with no significant effect. Allied forces moved inland, establishing forward air bases as they went and rolling back the perimeter of the war in the west.

The Eighth Air Force loss rate improved sufficiently in July for Doolittle and Spaatz to raise the level for completion of a combat tour from 25 bomber missions to 35.

The Luftwaffe was still able to inflict casualties, but the Allies—especially the United States—could replace their losses. The Germans could not. Already short of pilots, the Luftwaffe had to shut down its training schools for want of fuel.

New pilots went into combat with barely 50 hours of flying time.

The ground support role virtually ended as bomb racks were taken off fighters so they could concentrate on air defense. "By late September the Luftwaffe had almost abandoned the Wehrmacht to devote such fighting power as it had left to the Allied bomber fleets," the official AAF history of the war said. "Practically all pretense of maintaining a bomber force was gone, and bomber pilots now flew fighters."

Even so, the damage during the Big Week attacks to machinery and equipment at the German aircraft plants had not been as extensive as believed at first, and the armaments ministry was resourceful.

"For months the Allies had been looking on the GAF [German air force] as a beaten arm, capable only of rare and ineffective retaliation," the AAF history said. However, "Speer's ministry had worked its usual magic. Skillfully mobilizing materiel and manpower, it concentrated on the [Bf 109 and Fw 190] types and effectively dispersed aircraft production from 27 main plants to 729 smaller ones, some of which were located in quarries, caves, mines, forests, or just in villages. In doing this, the Germans abandoned mass production methods and greatly increased their costs, but they also concealed most of their production centers from both the

bombardiers and intelligence officers of the enemy."

In September, the Germans produced 4,103 fighters, their highest total for any month of the war. The Luftwaffe appeared to be poised for a resurgence, although the shortage of fuel and pilots did not allow the operation of nearly as many airplanes as Speer's factories were turning out.

THE LAST OF THE LUFTWAFFE

Germany's last real stand in the west was the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944, during which more of its aircraft and pilots were lost. That, combined with a massive transfer of aircraft to the Eastern front in January to meet the Soviet winter offensive "relegated the Western front to the status of a secondary air theater for the Luftwaffe," said historian Richard G. Davis.

The Messerschmitt Me 262, the world's first operational jet fighter, first appeared in July 1944, and its numbers increased in the opening months of 1945. It was very effective against the B-17s and B-24s, but the Germans had delayed Me 262 production—a bad decision by Luftwaffe chief Herman Goering—and at Hitler's insistence, modified the design to make it a fighter-bomber instead of a pure air superiority fighter. For the Luftwaffe, it was too little, too late.

The Allied armies advanced without any serious threat from German airpower. Eighth Air Force flew its last bomber mission April 8. There were no worthwhile strategic targets left.

The Luftwaffe was never completely destroyed. When the Germans surrendered in May, they had about 3,000 front-line combat aircraft remaining—with no means to operate them.

"It is generally conceded that the air war against Germany was won during the phase of our operations between the beginning of February 1944 and D-Day," Doolittle said years later. "The rate of attrition of the Luftwaffe's pilots exceeded Germany's rate of replacement. Also, the several months of reduced aircraft production during a crucial period created a shortage of reserve aircraft that was difficult to overcome. Thus, Germany was low in two essentials at a critical point: aircraft and pilots." ✪

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