The U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II

Africa to the Alps

The Army Air Forces in the Mediterranean Theater

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By the time the United States declared war on Germany and Italy on December 11, 1941, most of Europe had fallen under the domination of Adolf Hitler, dictator of Germany's Third Reich. In the west, only Great Britain, her armies expelled from the European continent, remained defiant; in the east, Hitler faced an implacable foe—the Soviet Union. While the Soviets tried to stave off a relentless German attack that had reached Moscow, Britain and her Commonwealth allies fought a series of crucial battles with Axis forces in North Africa.

Initially, America's entry into the war changed nothing. The United States continued to supply the Allies with the tools of war, as it had since the passage of the Lend-Lease Act in March 1941. U.S. military forces, however, had to be expanded, trained, equipped, and deployed, all of which would take time.

With the United States in the war, the Allies faced the question of where American forces could best be used. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British prime minister Winston S. Churchill had already agreed that defeating first Germany and then Japan would be their policy, but that decision raised further questions.

Roosevelt wanted U.S. troops in combat against German troops as soon as possible. Josef Stalin, the Soviet leader, demanded a second front in northern Europe to relieve pressure on his armed forces. Churchill, fearing German power in France, hoped for a strike at the Mediterranean periphery of Hitler's conquests—what he called the "soft underbelly" of Europe.

Churchill proposed an invasion of northwest Africa for late 1942 and Roosevelt agreed. As a result, American forces were soon on their way across the Atlantic, beginning a Mediterranean journey that would involve them in nearly three long years of combat.

Africa to the Alps describes the participation of the Army Air Forces in the war in the Mediterranean theater of operations, as it developed a practical air-ground doctrine, established an effective interdiction strategy, and gained valuable experience in airborne operations and close air support of ground troops.

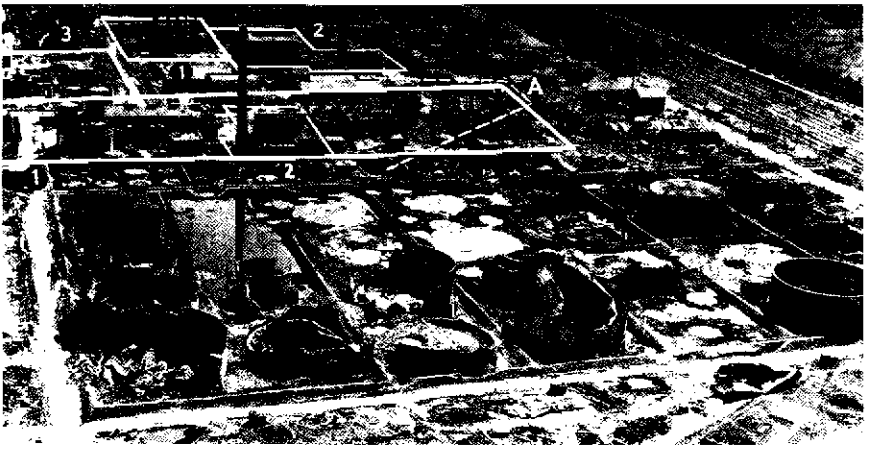
America Comes to the Desert

As U.S. and British leaders gathered in Washington after Pearl Harbor for their first wartime conference (Arcadia), British land, sea, and air forces were fighting against Axis forces in a desperate struggle for control of the Mediterranean. The Allies considered this area crucial to their interests because it affected supply lines to the Soviet Union, aircraft ferrying routes to India and China, and oil fields in Iran and Iraq. The prospect of triumphant German and Japanese armies joining forces in India remained a recurrent Allied nightmare.

An operation by the British Eighth Army in late 1941 that featured bold thrusts by armored spearheads drove the Germans and their Italian allies westward from the border of Egypt. But Gen. Erwin Rommel and his Afrika Korps soon resumed the offensive. What began as a limited German thrust in January 1942 against El Agheila, Libya, grew by May into a major attack. Bolstered by increased supplies, the Afrika Korps battled through British defensive positions at Gazala and captured Tobruk on June 21. Retreating across the western desert to hastily prepared defenses at El Alamein, sixty miles west of Alexandria, the British averted complete disaster only by determined rearguard fighting and domination of the skies.

As the Germans opened their May assault, Sir Charles Portal, chief of air staff for Britain, met in London with Gen. Henry H. Arnold, head of the Army Air Forces (AAF), to determine how to bring U.S. bombers and fighters to the Middle East. In fact, the first U.S. heavy bombers had already arrived. During a stopover along the African leg of a newly established ferrying route to India, twenty-three B–24s commanded by Col. Harry Halverson diverted from their Asian journey and proceeded to Egypt. There they prepared for a strike against Ploesti, a Romanian petroleum complex vital to the German war machine. Over the next three years, that target became legendary to the thousands of airmen who flew against it. On the evening of June 11, 1942, thirteen of Halverson's small force of B–24s took off from a Royal Air Force (RAF) airfield near the Suez Canal, arriving the next morning over the target where they bombed the refineries as planned. The raid marked the first AAF combat mission over Europe. From this modest start, the American presence in the Mediterranean theater grew into an overwhelming force.

Halverson's B–24s stayed and supported the U.S. Eighth Army in the desert war against Rommel. For the next several weeks, they joined the RAF in targeting German supplies, attacking convoys at sea, and repeatedly striking the harbors at Benghazi and Tobruk. In Cairo, meanwhile, the structure of the AAF in the Middle East took shape. On June 28, the U.S. Army Middle East Air Force (USAMEAF) activated under the command of Maj. Gen. Lewis Brereton. With nine B–17s from the Tenth Air Force in India, he was a recent arrival. The Halverson and Brereton heavy



The Concordia Vega Oil Refinery at Ploesti, Romania, was part of the area's petroleum-producing complex that was crucial to the German war effort. Allied bombers attacked the region repeatedly from 1942 to 1945, destroying (1) distillation plants, (2) boiler houses, and (3) cracking plants. The blasted oil storage tanks in the foreground left the Germans with no place to store whatever petroleum they were able to refine in the damaged operation.

bombers were the only U.S. combat aircraft in the Middle East until P–40 fighters and B–25 medium bombers arrived in August.

The USAMEAF joined the RAF, Middle East, commanded by Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur W. Tedder, and the Western Desert Air Force, led by Air Vice Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham, in forming the Allied air power opposing Rommel. The Americans soon became familiar with British air tactics and doctrine. They observed Tedder's and Coningham's fight within the British military to divorce air power from the control of ground commanders and they participated in the effective application of air power to the battlefield.

By the end of August, as new aircraft arrived, the Americans increased their tempo of operations, flying almost daily missions against enemy shipping at sea and in the ports of Benghazi and Tobruk. In September, U.S. P–40s and B–25s, flying with existing RAF units, joined the heavies in blunting a major Axis attack on Alam Halfa at the southern end of the British line. The next test for U.S. airmen came in October at El Alamein.

El Alamein

At 9:40 p.m. on October 23, 1942, Gen. Bernard L. Montgomery, the British Eighth Army's new commander, began the second battle of Alamein with a four-hour artillery barrage. Although the battle consisted primarily of tank and artillery duels, Allied air power also contributed.

Allied fighters and medium bombers slashed at frontline gun emplacements, tank groups, and infantry positions, and blasted overextended German supply lines. The U.S. 57th Fighter Group roared overhead, scoring twenty-nine aerial victories, and B–25s succeeded in breaking up two enemy counterattacks. By November 4, their victory was complete and Allied forces, including the U.S. Ninth Air Force, began pursuing the Afrika Korps across the Libyan desert and into eastern Tunisia, where Rommel linked up with existing German forces. Until late 1943, the Ninth Air Force supported the British advance, flew interdiction missions against German supply lines and reinforcements, bombed Ploesti, and joined the Tunisia-based Twelfth Air Force in attacks against a widening arc of targets northward into Sicily and Italy.

North Africa

In the predawn hours of November 8, 1942, the Americans and the British, commanded by Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, began their first combined World War II invasion, code-named Operation Torch. Three Allied task forces launched assaults against Vichy French positions across northwestern Africa.

Casablanca

The western task force, led by Maj. Gen. George S. Patton and composed of Americans, landed near Casablanca. Meeting stiff resistance, Patton's forces failed initially to capture the crucial airfield at Port Lyautey. But when that objective finally fell on November 10, P–40 aircraft from XII Air Support Command catapulted off the deck of the carrier USS *Chenango* and rushed to Port Lyautey. When they discovered a heavily damaged main runway that precluded air operations, some airmen got into the fight as assault infantry and others ran convoys of gasoline.

Maj. Gen. Lloyd Fredendall

Oran

Hundreds of miles to the east, Maj. Gen. Lloyd Fredendall's U.S.-dominated center task force approached Oran. Their daring objectives were to capture the port quickly, move inland rapidly, and relieve paratroopers flown in to take vital airfields at La Senia and Tafaraoui.

The night before the invasion, the 60th Troop Carrier Group's C–47s loaded with the 503d Parachute Infantry Regiment took off from St. Eval and Predannack in southwestern England, bound for Africa over 1,000 miles away. Trouble lay ahead. Bad weather and equipment problems broke up the formation and forced many aircraft to fly through the Spanish darkness alone. Next morning the C–47s were scattered from Gibraltar to Oran, with three aircraft interned in Spanish Morocco. In a remarkable feat of flying skill, most pilots put their paratroopers within a few miles of Tafaraoui, but U.S. units advancing from the beachhead took the objective before the airborne troops arrived.

On the afternoon of November 8, Twelfth Air Force commander Brig. Gen. James H. Doolittle ordered his 31st Fighter Group's Spitfires into Tafaraoui, where within a few hours they went into action against La Senia. The following day, the last French aircraft roared away from La Senia airfield, leaving behind only a few defenders. Shortly thereafter, the Tafaraoui Spitfires teamed with armored units to force the French to surrender.

Doolittle's airmen also rendered important support during the fight for Oran. Early on November 9, the Spitfires spotted a large column of the French Foreign Legion moving up from Sidi-bel-Abbès and turned it back with a devastating attack. The next day, French forces in Oran surrendered.

Algiers

The Eastern Task Force, comprising largely British troops and commanded by an American, Maj. Gen. Charles Ryder, captured Algiers and its airfield, Maison Blanche, on November 8. With all three Allied task forces now safely ashore, the initial phase of Operation Torch was over. Ahead lay Tunisia and the prize of the campaign—Tunis.

Maj. Gen. Charles Ryder

Tunisia

In mid-November 1942, as Montgomery pursued Rommel westward across the Libyan desert, Eisenhower learned of a German aircraft buildup in Tunisia and Sicily. The reports flooded in: Stuka dive-bombers seen at El Aouina, Tunisia; fighters spotted by aerial reconnaissance at other Tunisian airfields; and German transports seen at Trapani in Sicily. Eisenhower now realized that he faced a fight, not a race, for Tunisia.

Eisenhower quickly ordered the airborne capture of two forward airfields to extend air support for British and U.S. ground units moving eastward into Tunisia. On November 12, British parachutists carried by the

Gen. Erwin Rommel

AAF's 64th Troop Carrier Group overran the airfield at Bône, Algeria. Three days later, the 60th Troop Carrier Group dropped American paratroops at Youks-les-Bains airfield near the Tunisian border. By the end of November, Allied forces under the command of Lt. Gen. Kenneth Anderson, a Briton, reached Tebourba, just sixteen miles west of Tunis.

Meanwhile, the enemy's buildup in Tunisia accelerated. Using airlift and sealift, the Germans and Italians brought in tanks, trucks, ammunition, and thousands of men. On November 28, they struck Eisenhower's forces. Over the next five days, Axis troops, tanks, and aircraft pounded the Allies and drove them back almost twenty miles to the west.

Gen. Bernard L. Montgomery

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Winter rains further complicated Eisenhower's operations, quickly turning his unpaved airfields into seas of mud that bogged down Allied aircraft. The Germans, however, enjoyed modern airfields in Sicily, Sardinia, and Tunisia. They flew hundreds of bombers and their new fighter, the fast, well-armed FW 190, from all-weather, paved runways. As the winter weather worsened late in December, Eisenhower reluctantly went

Crews based in North Africa, like the airmen shown above, were briefed before each mission.

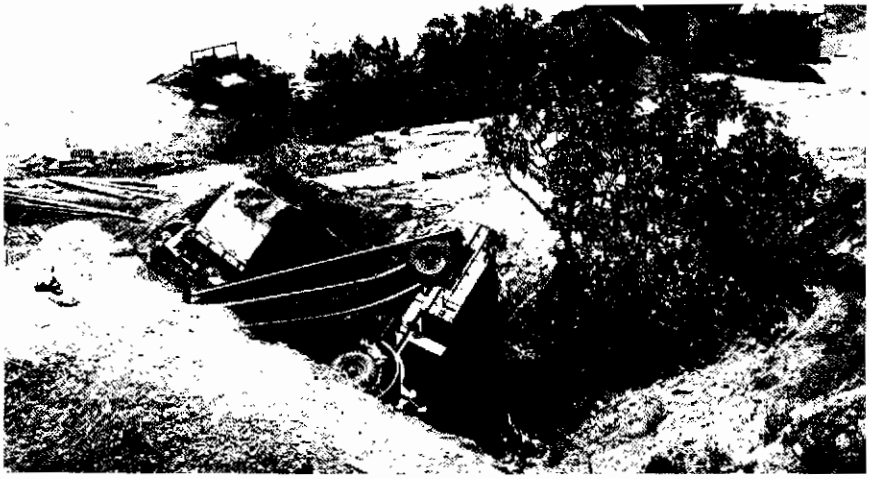
on the defensive, leaving Doolittle's B–17s and P–38s to carry the fight to Axis ports, shipping, and airfields.

The original plan for Operation Torch called for the assignment of an overall air commander, but Eisenhower decided that unified air forces were not usable. Thus, throughout November and December, American and British airmen fought separate wars, mainly in support of their respective army ground corps. Because senior army officers insisted that airmen be under their control to provide local protection and handle local problems, air power was not used efficiently. Consequently, at the end of 1942, Eisenhower and his senior leaders decided to consolidate Allied air resources into the Mediterranean Air Command, led by Air Chief Marshal Tedder. This reorganization permitted Tedder to direct scarce resources where they were most needed.

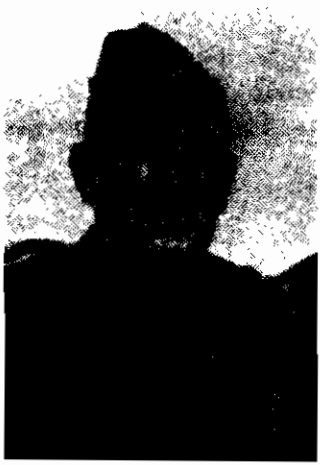
In the weeks ahead, two major tests awaited Eisenhower's forces in central Tunisia. The first occurred on January 30, 1943, when the Germans launched a strong offensive and drove the Allies back. For five days they fought a mobile defensive battle, finally reaching stronger positions. In mid-February, Field Marshal Rommel led a second powerful thrust, ripping through the Kasserine Pass. There the Allies—particularly the U.S. II Corps—suffered a stunning defeat. Several days later, Allied forces counterattacked and pushed the Germans back, thus ending the last serious Axis threat in Africa.

Meanwhile, at Allied Force Headquarters in Algiers, Eisenhower continued the reorganization of Allied air power and established the Northwest

As these two photos show, damage to German military equipment was heavy in Porto Farma, Tunisia, between Bizerte and Tunis.



African Air Forces (NAAF) under the command of Lt. Gen. Carl A. Spaatz. Under Tedder's direction as the single theater air commander, the NAAF, which comprised the U.S. Twelfth Air Force and Britain's Western Desert Air Force, offered unity of command within the theater and greater flexibility in the use of air power. The shock of Rommel's early success at the Kasserine Pass and persistent squabbling over the control of close air support forced Eisenhower to take more drastic action. Before the fighting ended, he created a centralized Allied Air Support Command under Air Vice Marshal Coningham. The aggressive New Zealander transformed tactical aviation in Tunisia. He immediately implemented his philosophy first to destroy the German Luftwaffe, then isolate the battlefield—a system



Air Vice Marshal Arthur Coningham

combat-proven by the British Eighth Army in its victory at El Alamein—and drive across the Libyan desert.

In March 1943, improving weather, more aircraft, and new airfields led to increased Allied air activity, diminishing complaints from the ground commanders and posing deadly challenges to the Luftwaffe. Alerted by Ultra, the famous Allied code-breaking effort, on April 18, scores of P–40s and Spitfires ambushed a formation of over one hundred German transports and their fighter escort off the Tunisian coast. The Americans struck swiftly. In what became known as the "Palm Sunday Massacre," they shot down nearly half of the enemy formation in a matter of minutes. This success against the Axis air transport system, combined with accelerated attacks over the next few weeks, forced the Germans to abandon daylight supply missions.

Meanwhile, Allied ground units in the west joined with Montgomery's forces from the east, and closed on Axis troops falling back on Bizerte and Tunis. Heavy fighting continued through April, but by early May surviving enemy forces had either surrendered or escaped to Sicily.

Birth of a Doctrine

The centralization of tactical air power in Tunisia under a single air commander was a seminal point in the development of modern air power doctrine. U.S. airmen, long frustrated by an air-ground doctrine that placed air power under the control of ground commanders, eagerly embraced the concepts implemented so successfully by Coningham. In praise of unified air power, Montgomery commented that

> Nothing could be more fatal to successful results than to dissipate the air resources into small packets placed under the command of army formation commanders, with each packet working on its own plan.

Influenced by favorable reports from U.S. commanders in Africa, Gen. George C. Marshall, Army chief of staff, supported efforts by his top airman, General Arnold, to push a new American air doctrine. Published in Field Manual 100-20 in July 1943, the new doctrine clearly stated that U.S. air and ground forces were equal and it elevated air superiority as the first requirement of the land battle. The manual, widely viewed as an AAF declaration of independence, gave air commanders broad flexibility in evolving

air support systems throughout the remainder of the war. Ensuing campaigns in Sicily and Italy further refined the doctrine's application.

Sicily

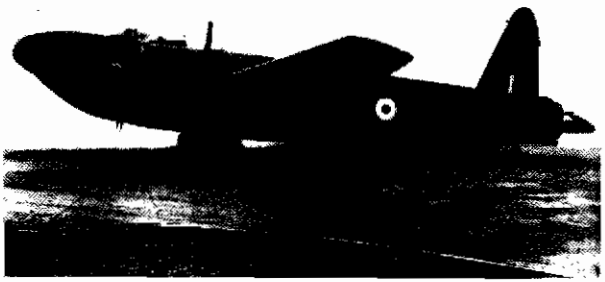
Before the fight for North Africa ended, Roosevelt, Churchill, and their top military advisors met at Casablanca in January 1943 to examine the worldwide course of the war and decide on future strategy. In the Mediterranean theater, they called for the conquest of Sicily (Operation Husky) following a North African victory. The Allies recognized the island of Sicily, located just south of the Italian mainland, as a logical step on the road to Rome.

Lying between Tunisia and Sicily, Pantelleria and Lampedusa posed a threat to the invading forces. With their radio direction finder stations, troops on both islands could interfere with ship movements in the Sicilian straits, and a modern airfield on Pantelleria gave the enemy an interdiction capability. Capturing the bases would protect the invasion forces and allow the Allies to deploy fighters to protect ships and men during the first stage of Operation Husky. Reluctant to invade, Eisenhower decided to bomb the defenders into surrender.

In late May, NAAF and Allied naval forces began pounding Pantelleria. The airmen unleashed a torrent of bombs using an array of aircraft, including B–17s, B–25s, B–26s, P–38s, P–40s, A–36s, A–20s, and RAF Wellingtons. On June 11, a battered Italian garrison eagerly surrendered. Enemy forces on Lampedusa capitulated soon thereafter.

Allied airmen then turned their full attention on Sicily. During the latter part of May, they bombed Sicilian and Sardinian airfields often and hard, and when Axis bombers pulled out for southern Italy, Allied airmen followed. In the last week of May, they struck heavy blows against Axis airfield complexes at Naples and Foggia.

In an effort to block enemy reinforcement of Sicily, NAAF flew hundreds of medium- and heavy-bomber sorties during the latter half of June



RAF Vickers-Wellington

Beginning in late May 1943, NAAF and Allied forces pounded the island of Pantelleria and reduced its streets to rubble. Enemy radar installations there posed a threat to Allied ship movements.

against depots, ports, and marshaling yards along Italy's western coast. As part of this effort, Messina, located on Sicily's northeast tip, was struck especially hard.

The Allied air forces also repeatedly hit airfields and landing grounds on Sicily, putting many of them out of service before the invasion. The Luftwaffe, however, still posed a threat. As Allied convoys approached Sicily on the night of July 9/10, enemy aircraft spread among bases in Sicily, Sardinia, Italy, and southern France still numbered in the hundreds. Although Allied air forces had nearly five thousand operational aircraft, they remained alert to possible attack.

The invasion plan called first for British and U.S. airborne assaults, the former by glider and the latter by parachute. The British began their operation on the evening of July 9 when 147 tow planes, each pulling a loaded glider, took off from Tunisia. The aircraft, nearly all C–47s from the AAF's Troop Carrier Command, carried the British I Airborne Division. Their mission focused on seizing a canal bridge south of the city of Syracuse on Sicily's east coast. Regrettably, strong winds, flak, and poor visibility caused most tow pilots to release their gliders in the wrong areas. Only twelve came down in the landing zone; at least forty-seven gliders crashed into the sea, drowning many of the troops aboard. But the

British managed to engage the enemy at the canal bridge and captured it the next day.

The U.S. phase of the operation paralleled that of the British. More than two hundred C–47s carrying almost three thousand paratroopers of the 82d Airborne Division left Tunisia on the evening of July 9. Delayed because of high winds and a missed checkpoint over Malta, they approached Sicily in almost complete darkness to discover that fire and smoke from earlier Allied bombing further obscured their drop zones. As a result, the paratroopers came down over a wide area. They carried out their mission, however, seizing and holding a strategic road junction east of Gela.

The Allies had decided to invade Sicily at its southeastern corner, with the U.S. Seventh Army under Lt. Gen. George Patton on the left and the British Eighth Army under Montgomery on the right. As dawn, July 10, approached, the amphibious phase of the operation began. At daylight, Allied airmen, including the recently arrived African-American troops of the 99th Fighter Squadron—popularly known as the "Tuskegee Airmen" —established defensive air patrols over the beaches and shipping. Nightfall found Licata, Syracuse, and the airfield at Pachino in Allied hands. The next day, the U.S. Seventh Army held the beachhead against assaults by the German *Hermann Goering* and Italian *Livorno* Divisions, sustaining more than two thousand casualties in the effort.

Patton decided to reinforce the beachhead with paratroopers from his North African reserves and he ordered a mission for the night of July 11. Not everyone got the word, however. Nervous antiaircraft gunners in the Allied fleet and on shore mistook the arriving Allied transports for the enemy and opened fire with devastating effect. The gunners shot down twenty-three out of 144 aircraft, damaged thirty-seven more, and inflicted 10 percent casualties on the paratroop force. The surviving troopers joined the Seventh Army's fight to take the coastal plain and move into the hills beyond.

On July 13, the American and British armies linked up and the critical assault phase was over. With the landings now secure, NAAF struck targets farther afield. Medium and heavy bombers attacked Messina on July 14, and B–17s and Wellingtons bombed Naples on July 14–15, damaging marshaling yards, rolling stock, and railroad tracks in both cities.

A week after the invasion, the U.S. Seventh Army raced north and west toward Palermo and the British Eighth Army moved against Catania. During these drives, AAF's XII Air Support Command helped the Americans, the RAF's Desert Air Force aided the British, and the Allied Tactical Bomber Force supported both armies.

On July 22, the Americans liberated Palermo, a swift action that required little air support. But across the island, air power played a major role in fighting for Catania. Airmen flew hundreds of missions in the last ten days of July, bombing enemy communications centers, troop and gun concentrations, ammunition dumps, roads, and bridges.

Lt. Gen. George S. Patton, commander of the U.S. Seventh Army, *left,* and Lt. Col. Lyle B. Bernard, commanding officer of the 30th Infantry Regiment, 3d Infantry Division, confer on the outskirts of Messina, Sicily.

On August 1, as the Sicilian campaign drew to a close, Libya-based B–24 Liberators of the Ninth Air Force struck Ploesti in the AAF's final heavy-bomber, low-level attack of the European war. A navigation error destroyed the daring plan's split-second timing, alerted Axis air defenses, and created confusion over the target; but despite very heavy losses, the crews grimly pressed home their attacks from altitudes as low as one hundred feet. Bravery and heroism in the attack on Ploesti resulted in five awards of the Medal of Honor. The Germans, however, swiftly repaired the damage.

As Allied troops approached Messina from the south and west in early August, enemy forces fled across the narrow straits to the Italian mainland. To slow their withdrawal, Allied aircraft targeted every means of escape. A–36 dive-bombers struck merchant vessels, barges, freighters, and other small craft; medium and heavy bombers pounded supply points, marshaling yards, and beaches; and fighters attacked harbor shipping. In spite of these efforts, the resourceful Germans saved thousands of men and tons of equipment.

The campaign in Sicily successfully combined air, ground, and sea power in one of the largest amphibious landings of World War II. Although a tough fight in torturous terrain followed, the eventual triumph secured Allied lines of communication in the Mediterranean, forced the Germans to transfer troops into southern France and the Balkans, and provided a springboard for the invasion of mainland Italy.

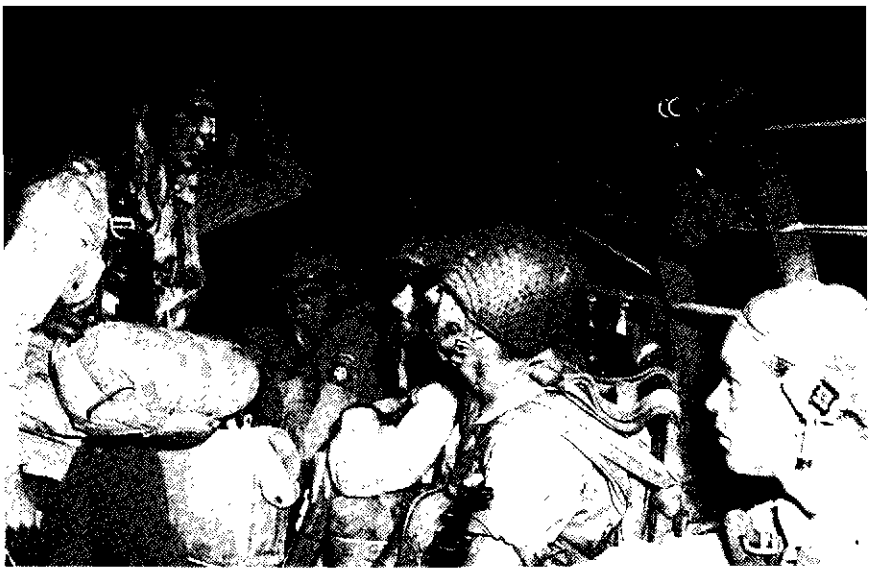
Italy

The air plan for the invasion of Italy called for bombing enemy airfields and communications lines, so from August 18 until September 2, 1943, Allied bombers attacked key cities, marshaling yards, harbors, bridges, and airfields. Allied air leaders also realized that most enemy supplies came down the narrow "boot" of Italy by rail, passing through the choke points of Rome, Naples, and Foggia. Raids had already disrupted marshaling yards at Rome and Naples. On August 19, U.S. and British heavy bombers struck Foggia. They cut lines to Naples, Manfredonia, and Bari; hit yards, nearby factories, and rolling stock; and wrecked electric substations. The airmen returned on August 25 to strafe and bomb the Foggia airfield complex with more than two hundred P–38s and B–17s. These attacks crippled enemy communications and proved invaluable to the success of the invasion of Italy.

The British Eighth Army crossed the Strait of Messina on September 3 and landed on the "toe" of Italy. Opposition proved slight as the Germans began a slow withdrawal. Six days later, following the Allied announcement of Italy's surrender, previously negotiated in secret, a British division landed at Taranto on Italy's "heel." That same day, the U.S. Fifth Army, commanded by Lt. Gen. Mark W. Clark, assaulted the beaches at Salerno, less than fifty miles south of Naples on Italy's western coast. Amid a hail of German artillery, mortar, and machine-gun fire that extended from the beaches to the transports, U.S. troops went ashore and pressed inland. Meanwhile, in response to the Italian surrender and determined to defend the peninsula, the Germans moved their forces south to occupy their former Axis partner's territory.

Using P–38s, A–36s, and Spitfires, the XII Air Support Command provided continuous air cover over the invasion area. Behind the beaches, airmen hoped to isolate the battlefield by cutting roads, rail lines, and bridges, but enough German reinforcements got through to contain the Salerno bridgehead. Elements of four Panzer divisions raced to the scene, and, on September 12, they launched a heavy counterattack designed to slice Clark's army in half and push it into the sea. Within two days, the enemy drove a deep and dangerous wedge into the Allied front, at one point coming within a thousand yards of the beach.

NAAF responded to the crisis by throwing its strength fully into the fight. Heavy and medium bombers attacked roads and junctions to isolate the battlefield; fighter-bombers flew hundreds of missions in direct support of the troops; and, finally, troop carriers brought in paratroopers who conducted three drops between September 13 and 15. The bombing was a spectacular success. Airmen obliterated roads, wiped out troop and motor transport concentrations, and wrecked rail lines. Stunned by its heavy losses, the enemy began pulling back on September 16. The U.S. Fifth Army now prepared to go on the offensive.



Paratroopers of the 82d Airborne Division participated in the invasion of Salerno, Italy, on September 13/14, 1943.

Africa-based B–24s bombed Foggia, Italy, in August and September 1943. They fought off FW 190s and reduced the airfields and railway marshaling yards to rubble.

While the Fifth and Eighth Armies readied for their move up the peninsula, Allied airmen again struck Foggia, shattering the airfield complex and wrecking close to three hundred enemy aircraft. These losses, combined with earlier maulings over Tunisia and Sicily, forced the

Germans to surrender local air superiority as they withdrew bombers and fighters either into central and northern Italy or back to Germany. For the remainder of September, as the Allies edged toward Naples and Foggia, their air forces mercilessly bombed and strafed the retreating Germans. Again and again, NAAF airmen pressed home their attacks. They blocked road junctions and other bottlenecks north and east of Naples; destroyed bridges at Lagonegro, Avellino, and Capua; shot up troops and trucks ahead of advancing Allied columns; and left railway spans impassable at Formia and Pescara. Under this sustained pounding, German resistance softened—a welcome outcome for the U.S. Army as it pushed slowly northward across the mountains toward Naples.

After a tough fight, Clark's Fifth Army poured onto the Naples plain and liberated the city on October 1. Meanwhile, with negligible interference from the Luftwaffe, the British Eighth Army captured Foggia's airfields and occupied the entire Gargano peninsula. With these victories, the Allies now held Naples, Bari, and Taranto—three of Italy's best ports and two of its most important air centers.

As 1943 drew to a close, Allied leaders, including Roosevelt, Churchill, and Chinese leader Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, and their top military advisors met at Cairo, Egypt, to plan future strategy. They created the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces (MAAF) to control all theater air

On Thanksgiving Day, 1943, the heads of the governments of China, the United States, and Great Britain, and their military advisers met in Cairo, Egypt, to plan future strategy. Pictured above, *seated left to right,* are Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Madam Chiang Kai-shek.

units and approved a U.S. proposal for an air force—the Fifteenth Air Force, based in the Mediterranean—to join in the strategic bombing of Germany. To coordinate activities of the veteran Eighth Air Force, operating against Germany from England, and the new Fifteenth Air Force, assembling in southern Italy, Allied leaders established the United States Strategic Air Forces in Europe (USSTAF). As part of the reorganization, Arnold sent Spaatz to England to command USSTAF. He also gave Doolittle the Eighth Air Force and moved Lt. Gen. Ira C. Eaker from England to head the MAAF.

Lt. Gen. James H. Doolittle, *left,* and Maj. Gen. Nathan F. Twining

Meanwhile, the Luftwaffe remained active. German airmen attacked Allied bomber formations, repeatedly raided La Maddalena harbor in Sardinia, and struck shipping off Naples and across the Mediterranean at Benghazi. During the night of December 2/3, approximately thirty German aircraft pounded Bari and blew up two ammunition ships in the harbor. The resulting explosions destroyed an additional seventeen vessels and closed the port for three weeks.

To reduce the Luftwaffe's threat, airmen of the MAAF hunted the enemy in the air and on the ground. They also teamed with Allied ground forces to bomb and strafe German troops approaching the front and to fly interdiction missions against roads and bridges. Meanwhile, a new strategic air force loomed on the horizon.

The Fifteenth Air Force: A Strategic Punch from the Mediterranean

Planning a series of coordinated, precision bombing attacks against the Luftwaffe, the AAF leadership activated the Fifteenth Air Force in Tunis on November 1, 1943. A month later, its headquarters moved to Bari, Italy, where it remained for the duration of the war.

Teamed with the Eighth Air Force and the RAF's Bomber Command in the combined bomber offensive, the Fifteenth Air Force began flying strategic missions the day after its activation. The Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS) directed the Fifteenth Air Force to give strategic bombardment

of Germany top priority, so it faced the challenge of flying missions throughout central and southern Europe. Its targets ranged from submarine pens in France to marshaling yards in Bulgaria. During its first three months, the Fifteenth Air Force not only fulfilled its strategic role but also directly supported the Italian campaign.

Also during this period, Allied airmen planned for Operation Argument, a series of coordinated attacks against German fighter assembly plants and the ball-bearing industry. In mid-February 1944, clearing weather allowed Operation Argument, later called Big Week, to begin. The RAF and the Eighth Air Force flew the brunt of the missions from England, and the Fifteenth Air Force, led by Maj. Gen. Nathan F. Twining, bombed industrial sites in Austria and southern Germany. Operation Argument ended when the weather turned bad on February 25 and Allied airmen assessed the situation. They concluded that they had seriously disorganized the enemy's aircraft industry by damaging or destroying almost 70 percent of its factory buildings. Later evidence showed that, although the Germans dispersed their aircraft plants and eventually increased production, for a critical period they were deprived of almost five hundred desperately needed fighters.

Until the war's end, Twining's airmen flew a variety of missions, not only bombing strategic targets but also supporting operations in the

Choking smoke rises from German oil refineries struck by U.S. Fifteenth Air Force heavy bombers in raids conducted in May 1944.

The Allies carried out 23 large-scale attacks on Ploesti, Romania, in the spring and summer of 1944. Some of the 13,000 tons of bombs dropped there resulted in this damage to a German oil refinery.

Mediterranean, including the Anzio landing, the invasion of southern France, and assaults on the Gustav and Gothic Lines in Italy. Of all Fifteenth Air Force targets, however, Ploesti stood alone. Following up on earlier raids, the Fifteenth Air Force's heavy bombers attacked Ploesti's refineries nineteen times in 1944, always braving heavy flak and German and Romanian fighters. These missions cost the United States hundreds of heavy bombers and thousands of crewmen. But by the time Stalin's Red Army overran the complex in August 1944, the airmen had cut enemy fuel production there by 80 percent, seriously damaging the German war machine.

By the end of the war, the Fifteenth Air Force had helped to destroy almost half of Hitler's fuel production capacity, seriously damage his fighter production, and cripple his transportation system. Twining's airmen did it all, from high-altitude precision bombing to strafing enemy movement on the ground.

The Gustav Line

Rome

As the Fifteenth Air Force pounded strategic targets in central and southern Europe, Allied leaders in Italy looked north to Rome and saw a major psychological symbol: liberating that city would mark the fall of the first Axis capital. Rome's capture also promised strategic advantages by providing airfields closer to Germany and forcing the enemy back to defensive positions in the northern Apennines. Predictably, the experienced

Field Marshal Albert Kesselring

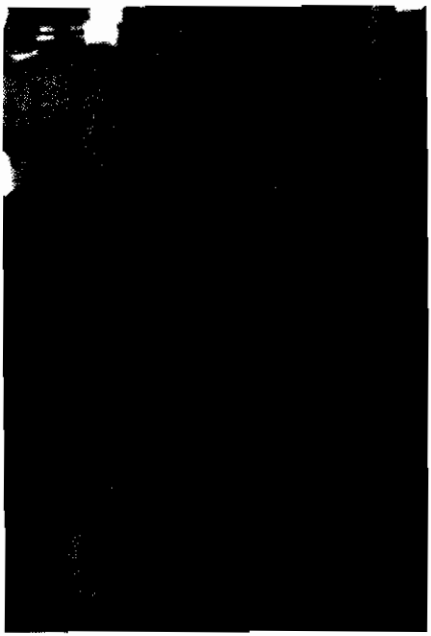
and resourceful German commander in Italy, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, also realized Rome's significance. As the U.S. Fifth Army landed at Salerno, he ordered construction of a defensive line across the width of the country south of Rome. Initially, Kesselring intended merely to delay the Allied advance; later, hoping to halt it completely, he directed expansion of the fortifications, which he designated the Gustav Line. Taking maximum advantage of the mountainous terrain, his engineers sank thick concrete bunkers into the steep slopes, blasted artillery pits from the rocky faces, and carefully placed hundreds of deadly machine-gun nests. They strung miles of barbed wire and sowed thousands of mines. To reach Rome, the Allies had to either breach this line or go around it.

Allied armies began their drive on Rome shortly after the Salerno landings. The British Eighth Army moved up the eastern side of the Italian peninsula; the U.S. Fifth Army moved up the west. In October 1943, the Fifth Army crossed the raging Volturno River and approached Cassino. The airmen teamed with ground forces at the river by creating roadblocks and snarling enemy traffic along the coast and further inland. Roaming fighters then destroyed hundreds of German vehicles in the stalled columns.

During this period, however, the greatest concern of Allied airmen was not the enemy but the weather that all too frequently grounded Allied aircraft for days at a time. But the weather failed to stop Clark's Fifth Army. After consolidating its bridgeheads across the Volturno, the Fifth Army confronted Kesselring's Gustav Line.

Eisenhower and other Allied leaders dreaded a bloody frontal attack on the Gustav Line and they searched for alternatives. Following British success with an amphibious assault at Termoli on the Adriatic Sea, a similar move on Italy's west coast seemed feasible. A surprise landing behind the German defenders might draw them away from their deadly line and allow the Allies to punch through and race for Rome.

After examining possible landing sites, Allied commanders chose Anzio. The former seaside resort was the only location both close to Rome and within range of friendly aircover. On November 8, the first anniversary of Allied landings in North Africa, Gen. Sir Harold R.L.G. Alexander of Britain, commanding the 15th Army Group, gave Clark and his Fifth Army staff six weeks to plan and execute a landing. Lack of troops and shipping temporarily shelved the plan, but a stagnating front



Lt. Gen. Mark Clark, commanding general of the U.S. Fifth Army.

revived the idea in January 1944. Under strong British pressure, Clark's staff reviewed and expanded the original concept and scraped together an invasion force.

The Anzio operation would represent a major effort behind enemy lines. An Anglo-American force of infantry, armored, airborne, commando, and ranger units would make up the initial assault. Overhead, approximately twenty-six hundred aircraft of the XII Tactical Air Command, British Desert Air Force, Coastal Air Force, and Tactical Bomber Force would patrol the skies.

In a prelude to the landings, the British and French struck the right side of the Gustav Line on January 12, and eight days later the American II Corps, at the center of the Fifth Army front, attempted a forced crossing of the Rapido River. In the face of intense German fire, both attacks quickly bogged down with heavy casualties. On January 21, the Anzio landing force sailed from Naples.

Anzio

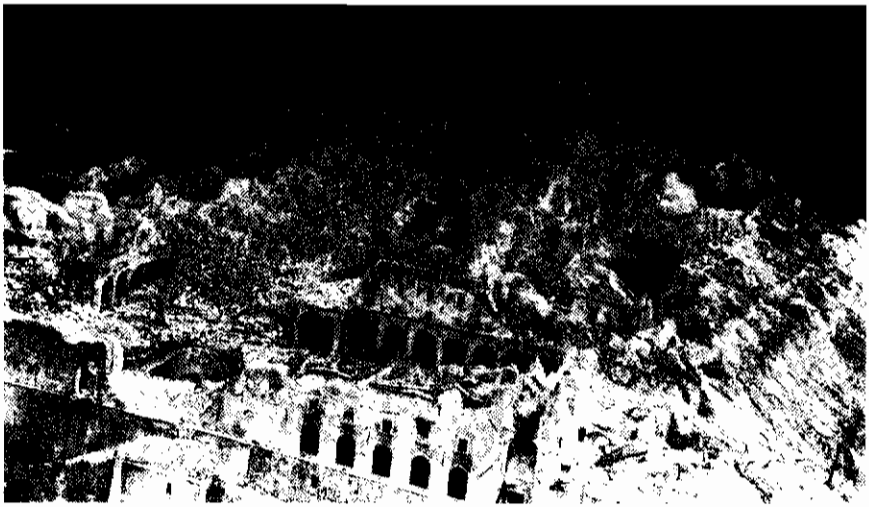
When the Allies approached Anzio in the early hours of January 22, 1944, they enjoyed complete surprise. German regional reserves had departed earlier to defend the threatened Gustav Line and left behind only a single company to face the unexpected onslaught. As the Allies came ashore, friendly fighters overhead spoiled the Luftwaffe's midmorning appearance over the beaches: they shot down seven aircraft, damaged several

others, and scattered the rest. Throughout the day, medium bombers cut road junctions beyond the beachhead and heavy bombers slowed a delayed German response by pounding transportation targets near Florence, Rome, and in the Liri Valley.

Allied forces met only scattered German resistance and pushed seven miles inland over the next few days. British and American troops captured the town of Aprilia, and the Americans closed to within three miles of Cisterna. Then, Maj. Gen. John P. Lucas, commander of the invasion force, cautiously halted the entire offensive, dug in, and awaited reinforcements. To his south, the Fifth Army had failed to crack the Gustav Line after ten days of bloody fighting.

Kesselring anticipated a landing behind the Gustav Line, but during the first few days of the attack on Anzio he lacked the reserves to respond. This situation changed quickly. While the Allies regrouped, Kesselring assembled reinforcements. Troops came from Rome to block exits in the Alban Hills. At Armed Forces High Command in Berlin, Hitler agreed to send in units from Yugoslavia, France, and Germany. A swelling enemy tide soon flowed toward Anzio. Allied airmen desperately battled the buildup, flying hundreds of sorties in appalling weather, but the Germans were unstoppable.

On February 4, Kesselring launched a massive assault. He hit the British hard near Campoleone, but he could not break the stubborn defenders. The German commander continued attacking throughout February, at one point ripping a gaping hole in the American lines and driving within a few miles of the beach. But the Americans desperately fought



The abbey at the top of Monte Cassino was thought to be a German observation post and the Allies destroyed it in February 1944.

back and plugged the gap, using fliers of the XII Air Support Command, artillery, naval gunfire, and armored units.

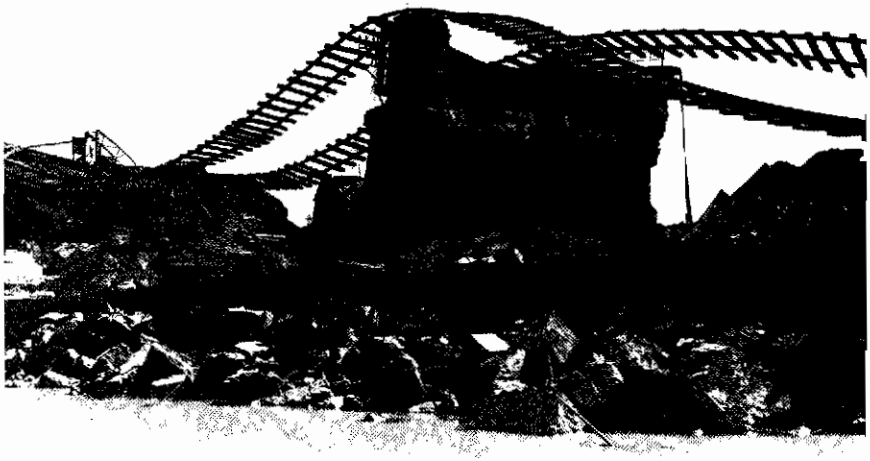
While the beleaguered Anzio defenders held on, the Allies continued to hurl themselves against the Gustav Line. Concentrated German defenses, rugged terrain, and miserable weather allowed little progress. A key German position in the line, the town of Cassino and the nearby hill, Monte Cassino, commanded the surrounding ground. A world-famous abbey at the top of Monte Cassino soon drew Allied attention as a possible enemy observation post. Following considerable debate, the Allied command ordered the abbey destroyed. On February 15, Allied bombers reduced the abbey to ruins. The Germans took maximum defensive advantage of the rubble, repeatedly holding off carefully planned and courageously executed attacks from the valley below. Slowly the battle ebbed at Cassino and elsewhere along the Gustav Line, as both sides neared exhaustion. By mid-March, an uneasy, three-month lull settled in after weeks of inconclusive fighting.

Operation Strangle

Allied airmen soon devised their own bold plan to help crack the Gustav Line: use air power to severely restrict enemy resupply. The air offensive, appropriately named Operation Strangle, called for thousands of strategic and tactical aircraft to attack every rail route the Germans used, thereby forcing them to rely on an inadequate network of roads. Planners hoped that the weakened defenders, starved of supplies and pressured by a renewed Allied ground offensive, would be unable to hold the Gustav Line, the key to central Italy.

On March 19, the Mediterranean Allied Tactical Air Force struck targets from the Gustav Line to the Swiss frontier. Medium bombers wrecked marshaling yards and repair facilities. Fighters and fighter-bombers of the XII Air Support Command and the Desert Air Force cut rail lines radiating from Rome to cities in central Italy. As trains stacked up north and south of Rome, heavy bombers borrowed from the air war over Germany hit distant rail centers in northern Italian cities and scrambled enemy troops and supplies from beyond the Alps.

Operation Strangle differed from earlier endeavors in that Allied airmen simultaneously targeted whole systems of bridges, yards, tunnels, and even open stretches of track. Beginning in March, for example, medium bombers flew 176 missions against bridges between Rome and Florence, destroying or damaging at least nineteen bridges. They also dropped three spans on a principal route between Genoa and southern France. By March 24, medium bombers had cut every major line that supplied the German front. Meanwhile, the fighter-bombers attacked bridges, stretches of track, supply centers, tunnels, and viaducts. Fighter-bombers, in particular, proved surprisingly successful as bridge busters: in a single



The Allied air offensive Operation Strangle was planned to severely disrupt enemy resupply efforts in Italy. Among the targets were a critical railroad junction at Orvieto, *top*, and rail lines at Bologna, *bottom*.

day, P–47 Thunderbolts from the 57th Fighter Group destroyed six bridges.

Contemporaneously, B–17s and B–24s of the Fifteenth Air Force pounded northern Italian transportation centers. A series of missions flown in the final days of March rained destruction on marshaling yards and adjacent industrial areas at Verona, Turin, Milan, and Bologna.

As Operation Strangle progressed, the Germans tried to repair rail lines, construct bypasses, ship around breaks, and shuttle trains over usable segments of track. Nothing worked. The enemy was unable to overcome

the rail damage inflicted by MAAF's aircraft and so began to rely on motor transport. Italian roads, soon clogged with trucks, drew swarms of American fighters and fighter-bombers that ripped into the exposed German columns and left hundreds of blazing wrecks.

Kesselring found it difficult to meet his front's demands for men and matériel. German units moving down from the north reached the battle area only after sustaining heavy casualties and losing much of their equipment. Stocks of motor fuel, heavy ammunition, and equipment dropped alarmingly. But a static battlefield permitted the Germans to maintain their forces in central Italy by strict rationing, foraging for food, and moving supplies and reinforcements after dark.

As the air campaign neared the two-month mark in early May, rested and refitted Allied ground forces once again prepared to assault the Gustav Line. On May 11, one hour before midnight, soldiers of the U.S. Fifth and British Eighth Armies heard the barrage of a thousand Allied guns cross the narrow front from Cassino westward to the Tyrrhenian Sea. Early the next morning, the troops attacked. Against stubborn German resistance, Polish forces on the right moved into the ruins of the abbey at Monte Cassino, British and Canadian troopers in the center crossed the Rapido River, and the Americans on the left pressed forward into the Liri Valley.

The MAAF directly supported the assault while maintaining pressure against German lines of communication in the rear. Heavy bombers first struck Kesselring's headquarters and those of the German Tenth Army, then targeted enemy-controlled marshaling yards and ports in central Italy. Medium bombers and fighter-bombers concentrated on command posts, strongpoints, troop concentrations, bridges, and towns, while newly organized jeep-borne ground spotters directed air strikes on enemy positions in the Liri Valley. These coordinated MAAF attacks wreaked havoc on the German defenders.

As the ground forces moved forward, so did the aviation engineers, who repaired captured airfields and built new ones for Allied aircraft, some in less than five days. They moved so fast that a forward patrol of the Fifth Army once captured an engineer survey team and held it prisoner, refusing to believe that any outfit could get ahead of the infantry. With this type of enthusiastic air support, equally eager ground forces smashed through the Gustav Line and forced Kesselring into headlong retreat. This stunning success justified the faith that Allied planners placed in the men and planes of Operation Strangle; in part, the breakthrough came because of them.

Meanwhile, on May 23, the American VI Corps, with the help of more than seven hundred air sorties, finally broke free from its five months of misery at Anzio. By June 1, the full impact of the air interdiction campaign hit the Germans. Their reserves of fuel and ammunition fell far below the danger point, and inadequate transport made distribution from depots impossible. These factors, together with air attacks on reserve units, broke the

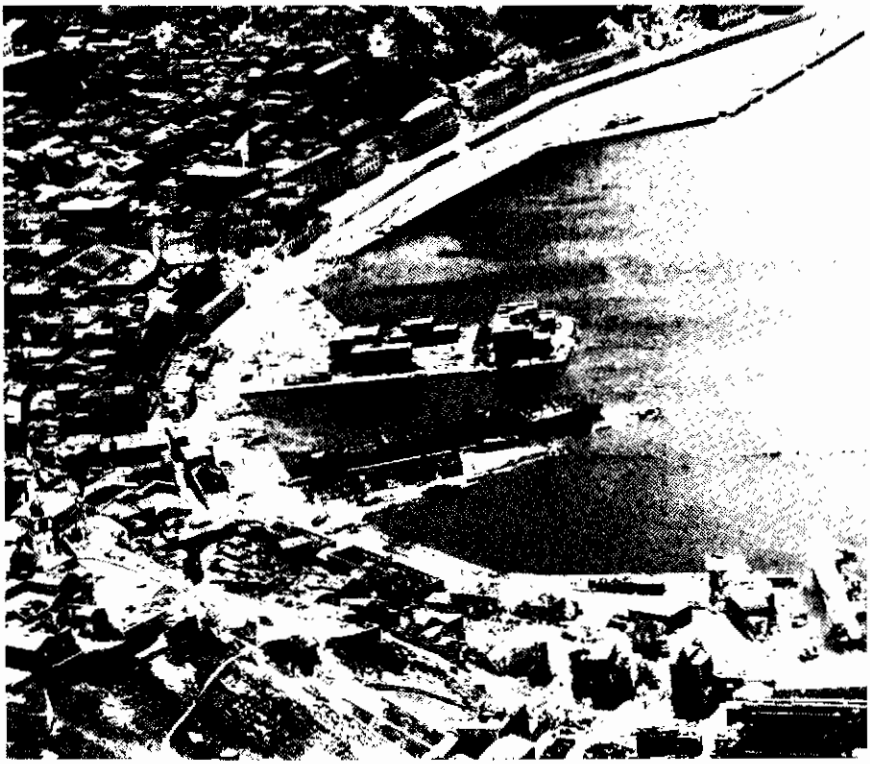
enemy's back. On the evening of June 4, 1944, American patrols entered Rome.

Under Eisenhower's command, the Normandy invasion two days later quickly overshadowed Rome's liberation and severely affected the future of the Italian campaign, as Allied leaders shifted men and matériel from the Mediterranean to the battle in France. But, even as units withdrew, Alexander kept pushing the Germans north.

The Allies progressed steadily despite increasing resistance, and by June 21 they stood 110 miles north of Rome. Allied air power speeded the advance by bombing bridges, road transport, and troop concentrations, and by flying close air support missions. Still rolling north, the Fifth Army's 442d Regimental Combat Team, a Japanese-American unit destined to become one of the most heavily decorated of the war, took the port of Leghorn on July 19 and reached the banks of the Arno River a few days later.

Meanwhile, the port of Ancona fell to the British Eighth Army's Polish Corps, and British forces entered the city of Florence in early August. Allied forces, exhausted from months of continuous combat, halted to rest, refit, and prepare for future fighting. Unfortunately, this pause gave the

Leghorn harbor facilities, on the west coast of Italy, had been used by the Germans to supply their troops on the Italian front. During Operation Strangle, the harbor sustained extensive damage.



The British Eighth Army's Polish Corps took the port of Ancona, Italy.

Germans time to complete their newest defensive obstacle in Italy, the Gothic Line.

Invasion of Southern France

As early as August 1943, the Combined Chiefs of Staff had explored the possibility of a diversionary attack in southern France to be launched in coordination with Operation Overlord, the main cross-channel assault at Normandy. Mounting a new invasion, however, would require troops from Italy, and the intensified fighting there, especially at Anzio and along the Gustav Line, consumed more troops, shipping, and supplies than the Chiefs had anticipated, forcing them to postpone a decision on any peripheral invasions until after the fall of Rome.

Following the liberation of Rome, the plan to invade southern France won approval. Eisenhower needed ports to support his forces pouring into Normandy, and Marseilles, on the French Riviera, fit the bill. An invasion there promised a direct route to vital German industry in the Ruhr region. Thus, on July 2, the CCS set a target invasion date of August 15.

As invasion planning proceeded, MAAF's fighters and medium bombers in Italy continued supporting the Fifth and Eighth Armies' drives toward the Po River, appearing only infrequently over southern France. Heavy bombers, however, flew several important preinvasion missions. On July 5, 228 B–17s and 319 B–24s hit marshaling yards at Montpellier and Bezier and the naval installations at Toulon. They quickly staged several more raids against bridges and airfields. In early August, more than one thousand heavy bombers attacked rail lines and oil storage installations in the invasion area.

By August 5, the remainder of the MAAF joined the assault. Fighter-bombers hit bridges, locomotives, rolling stock, and railroad tracks in and around Marseilles. B–25 medium bombers struck important bridges at Avignon. Five days later, a preparatory bombing campaign began in earnest. Allied aircraft attacked coastal defense guns and radar stations in the assault area, then spread out to strafe Luftwaffe airdromes as distant as northern Italy. Day by day, as the air attacks intensified, troops, shipping, and troop carrier aircraft assembled. At the end of the remarkably short span of six weeks, the landing force stood ready.

In the early morning hours of August 15, 396 planes of the Provisional Troop Carrier Air Division dropped more than five thousand American and British paratroopers near Le Muy, France. A few hours later, the MAAF reinforced this initial wave with glider-borne units. By dawn, the paratroopers were fighting for Le Muy, while heavy and medium bombers and fighter-bombers swept over the invasion area and destroyed underwater obstacles, beach defenses, and coastal guns. The payoff came as the American Seventh Army and the French II Corps hit the beaches against light and disorganized enemy resistance.

The railroad bridge at Piacenza, Italy, was the only such bridge that crossed the Po River in this area. The bridge was a MAAF target in Operation Strangle.

Aided and protected by MAAF's aircraft, the assault troops quickly consolidated their positions and moved inland. By the end of D-Day, the U.S. 45th Division reached Le Muy and linked up with airborne troopers dropped the previous night. French and American units on the invasion's left flank, aided by medium bombers, turned west and captured Toulon and Marseilles at month's end.

Concurrently, the main American force, preceded by medium and fighter-bomber attacks, moved up the Rhône Valley as German traffic streamed north to escape the Allied juggernaut. Unprotected by the Luftwaffe, the retreating Germans were easy targets. Allied aircraft bombed and strafed the congested columns at will during daylight, shredding the fleeing troops and transport. Later, the American Seventh Army reported more than two thousand destroyed vehicles choking one stretch of territory. Periodically, the Germans turned and fought, but Allied ground and air forces quickly overwhelmed them.

Finally, on September 6, near the Belfort Gap, the Germans stood their ground long enough to permit an orderly withdrawal. Shortly thereafter, the Seventh Army and the French II Corps met elements of Patton's Third Army, fresh from its Normandy breakout and dash across France. Together, the two armies turned toward the Rhine and the attack on the German homeland.

* * *

The invasion of southern France was the last of a series of amphibious operations in the Mediterranean that began in North Africa and continued with assaults on Pantelleria, Sicily, southern Italy, and Anzio. None was more successful than that in the south of France. The battle-won lessons of the earlier invasions finally bore fruit on the beaches of the French Riviera and in the campaign that followed.

Conventional Allied amphibious assaults, involving thousands of men fighting along a clearly defined battlefront, were vital to victory. But European rebellion against Axis occupation, although unconventional and peripheral, was also important in defeating Hitler. Here, too, the AAF made a major contribution.

Support for Resistance Movements

Following the German victories in Europe, patriotic elements arose in virtually every occupied country. The Allies encouraged these groups, popularly known as the "underground" or as "partisans," to organize, gather intelligence, and resist. As early as 1940, the British government established the Special Operations Executive (SOE) to aid them. Later, in 1942, the Americans followed with their own Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The activities of both of these organizations came to be called "special operations."

In the Mediterranean theater, special operations started slowly. Before September 1943, the Allies conducted them on a limited scale, flying only a few missions into France. But Allied agents, acting with the French resistance, soon pressed for more. Faced with expanding special operations, the RAF formed the 334th Wing in November 1943 to command almost all special-duty aircraft in the theater.

The Balkan Partisans

When Eaker arrived in the Mediterranean at the end of 1943, he expressed an interest in special operations and arranged for an American unit, the 122d Liaison Squadron, to participate. Additionally, in February 1944, two squadrons of the 62d Troop Carrier Group arrived in Brindisi, Italy, to support the Balkan partisans. Flying C–47s, they airdropped guns, ammunition, dynamite, food, clothing, and medical supplies to the partisans waiting below. When landings became possible, gasoline, jeeps, and even mules were quickly unloaded. In a typical mission, the Americans dropped thousands of pounds of ammunition and supplies, several SOE/OSS agents (called "Joes" and "Janes"), and hundreds of thousands of leaflets.

The C–47s solved a critical supply situation that the RAF 334th Wing, always short of aircraft, could not solve. Flying sorties in central and southern Yugoslavia, Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, and northern Italy, often in dangerous winter weather, the Americans dropped nearly 400,000 pounds of supplies and leaflets and numerous personnel in February and March 1944. A few weeks later, the original squadrons wearily welcomed their relief when four new C–47 units of the 60th Troop Carrier Group took over. The cargo pilots faced harrowing problems. They flew mainly at night and frequently had difficulty spotting the primitive landing strips in narrow valleys surrounded by peaks and ridges. Many of these fields could be approached from only one direction and failure on the first attempt could mean a wrecked aircraft and death. Despite the dangers, the number of night landings and escorted daylight sorties steadily increased. Between April and October 1944, the 60th Troop Carrier Group made more than seven hundred landings, almost all in Yugoslavia. Much of that support went to Marshal Tito (Josip Broz), a Yugoslav partisan leader locked in a savage struggle with the German invader. One typically dangerous mission involved delivering twenty-four mules and twelve 75-mm guns to Tito's partisans in Montenegro. Flying on instruments through terrible weather, the pilots slipped between two jagged peaks to a safe landing.

In October 1944, the AAF assigned heavy bombers to augment the transports, and the 885th Bombardment Squadron began flying to distant points in northern Italy and Yugoslavia. Until the end of the war, American units continued supplying partisan bands wherever they fought, from remote mountains and valleys to the teeming cities of Belgrade, Zagreb, and Sarajevo.

The Italian Resistance

The Italian resistance movement differed from its Yugoslav counterpart. In Italy, partisans took a supporting role while Allied and Axis forces fought on major battlegrounds along a well-defined front. The anti-Fascist guerrillas harassed German lines of communication, protected Allied agents, gathered information, and helped downed airmen evade capture.

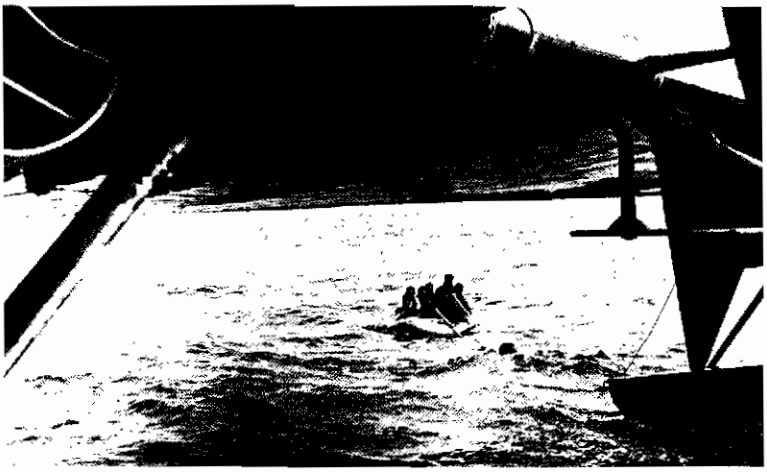
After the invasion of southern France, the United States increased its support for the Italian partisans. Flying first from North Africa and later from Italy, the 885th Bombardment Squadron dropped tons of supplies to resistance forces in the Po Valley. Supply drops increased dramatically when the 62d and 64th Troop Carrier Groups joined the effort. Partisan attacks on the enemy also increased. Field Marshal Kesselring reluctantly diverted nearly 40,000 troops from his crumbling front to suppress the guerrillas. Although the Germans killed or captured hundreds of partisans, they were unable to crush the resistance movement. American-supplied partisans continued fighting Germans in northern Italy until the war ended.

Evacuation from Enemy Territory

As the tempo of Balkan operations intensified, the MAAF faced the problem of evacuating increasing numbers of downed Allied fliers. Many aircraft did not return after missions against heavily defended targets. Fortunately, some aircrews parachuting from damaged aircraft or surviving crash landings came under the protection of the underground, which fed them, cared for their wounds, hid them from the Germans, and frequently helped them reach the Adriatic coast. When possible, partisans led downed airmen to secret airstrips where special operations aircraft flew them to safety.

In late July 1944, Eaker directed the Fifteenth Air Force to form Air Crew Rescue Unit No. 1, an outfit specifically devoted to rescue and evacuation. During the night of August 2/3, in a mission typical of many flown until war's end, the unit dropped a field party fifty-five miles south of Belgrade, where roughly one hundred airmen had assembled. The rescuers immediately set to work on a landing strip. Six days later, C–47s evacuated nearly three hundred men there.

Later in August, when Romania abruptly left the Axis and joined the Allies, the Fifteenth Air Force learned of more than one thousand American airmen held in prison camps near Bucharest. The POWs faced imminent deportation to the Third Reich. Hurriedly converting 56 B–17s into transports, the Italy-based Fifteenth Air Force mounted Operation Reunion. As the newly converted transports touched down near the camps, the former prisoners surged forward, happily crowded into the B–17s, and were flown to safety.



Rescuing downed airmen who parachuted from damaged aircraft or survived crash landings became one of the responsibilities of the Fifteenth Air Force's Air Crew Rescue Unit No. 1.

* * *

The special operations units, using equipment and techniques adapted to their peculiar operational problems, took on a certain aura that distinguished them from normal combat units. Bombers and fighters made headlines, but the work of special operations personnel remained secret and apart. The looks of relief on their passengers' faces kept morale high and added immeasurably to the pride they felt in flying these dangerous but unsung missions.

Breaching the Gothic Line

In the autumn of 1944, while Eisenhower's forces drew close to the German border, Allied soldiers in Italy began their assault on the Gothic Line. On August 26, with the support of Allied aircraft, the British Eighth Army launched an assault against Kesselring's left flank. P–40 Kittyhawks, P–51 Mustangs, and other fighter aircraft attacked German tanks, troops, and guns. Medium bombers pounded fortifications between Pesaro and Rimini and hit marshaling yards at Cesena, Budrio, and Rimini. Supporting the U.S. Fifth Army's upcoming attack, Allied medium and heavy bombers struck north of the Gothic Line near the Po River. By September 5, all crossings from Turin to the Adriatic were blocked. To further isolate the Germans, Allied bombers attacked industrial areas in northwest Italy and destroyed every rail bridge over the Ticino River between

From ancient times, inhabitants of the Italian peninsula had built their cities on the peaks of the Apennines for easy defense. The Germans stretched their Gothic Line across the same peaks.

Lake Maggiore and the Po. Meanwhile, fighter-bombers cut roads and rail lines leading to the Gothic Line.

When the Fifth Army's assault began on September 9, medium bombers shifted their attacks to rail lines leading directly into Bologna. Along with fighter-bombers, they began blasting a path through the enemy line. On September 21, while the MAAF knocked out hastily repaired bridges over the Po River and struck marshaling yards, crossroads, military camps, trucks, rolling stock, and track, the Eighth Army captured the city of Rimini on the Adriatic Sea. Meanwhile, Allied airmen further isolated the Gothic Line by blocking transit through the Brenner Pass on the border between Germany and Italy and cutting enemy lines of communication along the Brenta, Piave, and Tagliamento Rivers in northeastern Italy. This air and ground onslaught devastated Kesselring's defenders, and the Gothic Line finally cracked.

The day after Christmas, the German Fourteenth Army turned and struck the Americans outside Bologna, but within two days they pulled back to new defensive positions. In mid-January 1945, the MAAF renewed attacks on the enemy's transportation system in northeastern Italy and further disrupted their withdrawal. Despite these efforts, however, fighting dragged on along a static front until April, when the final offensive began against remaining German forces in Italy.

The Final Offensive: Advance to the Po River

Beginning on the afternoon of April 9, 1945, and continuing over a two-day period, 1,673 heavy bombers saturated enemy target areas opposite British 5 Corps and Polish 2 Corps, and 624 medium bombers attacked German defenses and troop concentrations. As the bombers were leaving, fighter-bombers of the Desert Air Force and the XXII Tactical Air Command appeared overhead, strafing and bombing enemy command

posts, gun positions, and strongpoints. Following the saturation attacks, New Zealand and Polish troops surged forward and, by the evening of April 11, reached the Santerno River.

Delayed by torrential downpours, the Fifth Army stepped off on April 14, heavily supported by the XXII Tactical Air Command. The Americans made rapid progress in their attack and soon captured Bologna. With the British Eighth Army on their right, they forced the Germans to withdraw to the Po River.

Driven from their carefully prepared positions, the Germans fled northward, but the bombing campaign's cumulative effects dogged them. When they reached the Po, the Germans lacked both the ability to stop the pursuing Allied forces and the means to make a rapid and orderly retreat. They were finished. Negotiations began on April 29, and on May 2 the Germans signed terms of unconditional surrender. The war in Italy was over.

Conclusion

American airmen of the Ninth, Twelfth, and Fifteenth Air Forces fought in ten major campaigns in the Mediterranean theater of operations. In North Africa, American and British airmen forged a usable air-ground doctrine that consolidated air power under the control of air, rather than ground, commanders. Moreover, everyone gained vital experience in working as an air-ground team.

With growing confidence, Allied airmen played a significant role in the Sicily operation, as they pounded Pantelleria into surrender, gained air superiority over Sicily, and delivered close air support throughout the campaign. When the Allies landed on the shores of Italy, and later on the beaches at Normandy, they carried with them the wealth of experience so hard won in Africa and Sicily. In pushing the Germans from the tip of Italy's boot north to the Alps, the Allies not only tied up enemy divisions that could have been used against the Soviets or the Allied invasion of France, but also secured Mediterranean lines of communication that served as vital links to the Middle East, India, and beyond.

In executing Operation Strangle, U.S. and Allied airmen reduced enemy supplies and shattered the ability of Hitler's forces to resist Allied ground attacks. Airmen also proved that they could sustain the partisans in the Balkans, northern Italy, and France, and bring to safety large numbers of wounded personnel and downed fliers.

When the Germans surrendered in northern Italy, American airmen could look back with pride. Alongside their allies and at great cost in men and matériel, they had fought from the hot and windblown deserts of North Africa to the freezing, snow-covered Italian Alps; supported four major assault landings; and achieved air superiority in the Mediterranean.

Churchill had championed the Mediterranean theater as the soft underbelly of the Axis. American war correspondent Ernie Pyle disagreed with Churchill and he got it right. Echoing the emotions of many who fought there, he labeled that theater a "tough old gut."

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