The daytime vs. nighttime bombing debate carried the highest stakes—the outcome of the war against Germany.

Decision at Casablanca

By Herman S. Wolk

SIXTY years ago, in January 1943, the US Army Air Forces leadership squared off against Britain's air ministry and Prime Minister Winston Churchill on the key issue of strategic bombing. The decision that was reached at a 10-day conference in Casablanca, French Morocco, marked a critical turning point in World War II.

Allied heads of state and the Combined Chiefs of Staff at the Casablanca Conference, the second of the Anglo–American wartime meetings, faced this question: Should the AAF continue its daylight strategic bombing campaign or join the Royal Air Force in night bombing operations against Nazi Germany?

The Allies had to decide where to attack after completing the North African campaign. By late 1942, there already were signs that the Allies were beginning to take the offensive against the Axis powers.

In the Southwest Pacific, Maj. Gen. George C. Kenney's Fifth Air Force had gained air superiority over Japan, and by 1943, Buna, Papua (a critical point in the battle for New Guinea), fell to the Allies. Previously, in May and June 1942, Japan had suffered heavy losses in the battle of the Coral Sea and Midway island. On Guadalcanal, the tide had turned in favor of the US Marines.

On the other Axis front, the Allies had invaded North Africa in early November 1942 under the code name Operation Torch and soon showed good progress. In late November, after the Allies defeated the Nazis in Tunisia, President Franklin D. Roosevelt recommended to Churchill that Britain, Russia, and the US convene a military conference.

Roosevelt seemed certain that Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin would want to attend. Churchill willingly accepted since, as he said, "At present we have no plan for 1943 which is on the scale or up to the level of events."

As it turned out, Stalin declined the invitation, saying he was too busy repelling the Germans at Stalingrad. However, the meeting stood, because

Despite damage, a B-17 stays in formation and drops its bombs. British leaders were skeptical of AAF plans to conduct daytime strategic bombing of Germany.

Churchill wanted to gain American approval for a Mediterranean strategy that called for an attack on Italy in 1943. Churchill believed that hitting the underbelly of Hitler's Fortress Europa would force Germany to scatter its forces, making a final Allied blow against the European continent less costly.

Churchill also believed that Roosevelt, having been "in for a penny" with Operation Torch, would send US forces "in for a pound" to continue operations in the Mediterranean.

Roosevelt, in fact, was inclined to accept the Mediterranean strategy, but US military leaders were not. They had been opposed to the North African thrust, considering it more a political move than a sound military step. Instead of pushing on into Italy, said Gen. George C. Marshall, US Army Chief of Staff, the Allies should invade across the English Channel as soon as possible.

"The Mediterranean is a blind alley to which American forces had only been committed because of the President's insistence that they should fight the Germans somewhere," Marshall argued.

Day vs. Night Bombing

Meanwhile another Allied argument intensified in the run-up to the Casablanca Conference. RAF Air Chief Marshal Charles A. "Peter" Portal wanted the AAF to join the RAF in night bombing, since during daytime, the B-17 bomber would be vulnerable to Luftwaffe fighters.

Because the RAF's Bomber Command had suffered heavy losses during daylight raids, Portal thought nighttime bombing was the right approach. Air Chief Marshal Arthur T. "Bomber" Harris, commander of RAF Bomber Command, concurred and said that area bombing or city-busting could wreck the German economy and war machine, making an Allied invasion unnecessary.

However, one RAF official who had met with AAF leaders during 1941 discussions in Washington, D.C., knew they wanted to conduct daytime bombing over Germany. Air Vice Marshal John C. Slessor, assistant chief, Air Staff (Plans), sent a note to the British secretary of state for air, Archibald S.M. Sinclair, explaining that the US was deeply committed to daylight precision bombing.

Slessor pointed out that Lt. Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, AAF Commanding General, Maj. Gen. Carl A. "Tooey" Spaatz, Twelfth Air Force commander, and Maj. Gen. Ira C. Eaker, Eighth Air Force commander, were convinced that, once they had bombers in sufficient numbers, they could do the job in the daytime. He wrote: "Americans are much like other people—they prefer to learn from their own experience. If their policy of day bombing proves to their own satisfaction to be unsuccessful or prohibitively expensive, they will abandon it and turn to night action. ... But they will not do this until they are convinced of the necessity. And they will only learn from their own experience. In spite of some admitted defects—including lack of experience—their leadership is of a high order, and the quality of their aircrew personnel is magnificent. If, in the event, they have to abandon day bombing policy, that will prove that it is indeed impossible. I do not believe it will prove to be so."

Churchill was not convinced. The Americans, he stated, would suffer heavy losses during the day, and it was necessary to convince them to join the RAF force at night. Sinclair, however, warned Churchill that the Americans were committed to daylight bombing. Should the British continue to question this campaign, it would jeopardize the entire bombing offensive against Germany and potentially encourage an American swing to the Pacific.

The Eaker Ploy

The debate continued into late December 1942, when Portal finally joined Sinclair and Slessor in the view that pushing the AAF on this issue could cause deep resentment and have a lasting negative effect on the air war. However, Arnold wanted to take no chances with the fundamental concept of US strategic airpower. He asked Lt. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander in chief, Allied Air Forces North Africa, to send Eaker to Casablanca for fear that Churchill still might convince Roosevelt to shift Eighth Air Force to nighttime bombing.

On Jan. 15, 1943, Eaker arrived in Casablanca. The British had come to the conference armed with position papers and a comprehensive agenda. Churchill brought his top military leaders—Field Marshal Alan F. Brooke, Portal, Maj. Gen. Hastings Ismay, Admiral of the Fleet Dudley Pound, Admiral Louis Mountbatten, and Slessor—backed by a large staff.

"We Americans were unprepared," recalled Col. Jacob E. Smart, who accompanied Arnold. "The President had failed to inform the Chiefs of the armed services of the nature of the meetings. The Chiefs came without agreed position papers. The unprepared Americans could only react to well-prepared positions—all pre-

Maj. Gen. Carl "Tooey" Spaatz (left), Twelfth Air Force commander, confers with Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder. Spaatz, like Arnold, Andrews, and Eaker, met with Churchill privately, pressing the case for daytime bombing.

pared from the British point of view. We felt that we had been duped."

Arnold had prepped Eaker. "The President is under pressure from the Prime Minister to abandon day bombing and put all our bomber force in England into night operations along with—and preferably under the control of—the RAF," Arnold told Eaker.

Eaker was furious. "That is absurd," he replied to Arnold. "It represents complete disaster. It will permit the Luftwaffe to escape. The cross-channel operation will then fail. Our planes are not equipped for night bombing; our crews are not trained for it. ... If our leaders are that stupid, count me out. I don't want any part of such nonsense."

Arnold emphasized that Churchill needed to be persuaded and said he would arrange for Eaker to meet with the Prime Minister, who in fact thought highly of the Eighth Air Force commander.

Arnold had also made other plans. He arranged for Spaatz and Lt. Gen. Frank M. Andrews , commander, US Forces in the Middle East (who had flown in from Cairo, Egypt), to talk with the Prime Minister prior to the Churchill–Eaker meeting. Arnold, himself, already had pressed the case for continued daylight bombing with Churchill.

On Jan. 18, for 30 minutes, Eaker met with Churchill—dressed in his air commodore's uniform—at the Prime Minister's villa. Churchill stressed that, despite months of building up, the Americans had yet to drop a single bomb on Germany. He was skeptical of the daylight bombing concept. "I had regretted," he wrote in his memoirs, "that so much effort had been put into the daylight bombing and still thought that a concentration upon night bombing by the Americans would have resulted in far larger delivery of bombs on Germany."

Eaker predicted that by the end of January his bombers would be hitting targets in the Third Reich. The Eighth Air Force commander then proceeded to make the case for day bombing and gave the Prime Minister a one-page exposition of his rationale. Eaker emphasized that the Eighth had been held back by lack of long-range fighter escort, the commitment to Operation Torch, and by poor weather. He also pointed out that the Eighth's loss rate in daytime was lower than the RAF's at night.

A B-17 crew is forced to bail out over enemy territory. Fortress crews trained for daylight bombing of Germany, but such missions made them more vulnerable to attack by enemy fighters.

Day bombing, Eaker noted, would complement the night effort. The RAF, flying at night, would be guided by fires set by day—an around-the-clock offensive. "The devils will get no rest," he said. Since AAF crews had been trained to bomb in daytime, Eaker explained, if they operated at night, their losses would increase. It would take months for the AAF to prepare for effective night operations.

Eaker wrote in the position paper: "We have built up slowly and painfully and learned our job in a new theater against a tough enemy. Then we were torn down and shipped away to Africa. Now we have just built back up again. Be patient, give us our chance, and your reward will be ample—a successful day bombing offensive to combine and conspire with the admirable night bombing of the RAF to wreck German industry, transportation, and morale—soften the Hun for land invasion and the kill."

Skill and Tenacity Win

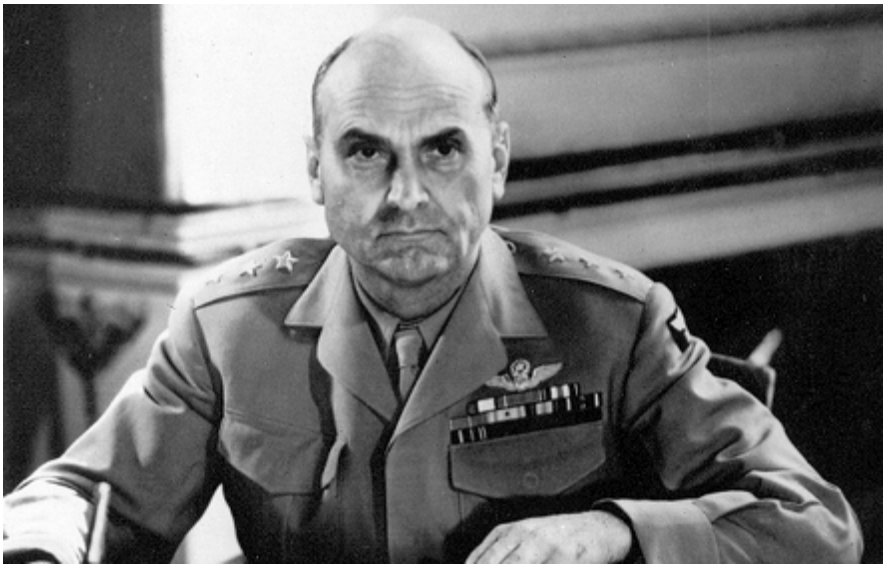
According to Churchill, Eaker pleaded his case "with skill and tenacity." If not sold by it, Churchill was certainly impressed. "Young man," he said, "you have not convinced me you are right, but you have persuaded me that you should have further opportunity to prove your contention. How fortuitous it would be if we could, as you say, 'bomb the devils around the clock.' When I see your President at lunch today, I shall tell him that I withdraw my suggestion that US bombers join the RAF in night bombing and that I now recommend that our joint effort, day and night bombing, be continued for a time."

The Eaker–Churchill meeting proved to be one of the critical turning points of the war in Europe. Arnold recalled, "We had won a major victory, for we would bomb in accordance with American principles, using methods for which our planes were designed."

Churchill said, later, "I decided to back Eaker and his theme, and I turned round completely and withdrew all my opposition to the daylight bombing by the Fortresses."

The Prime Minister seemed willing to let the matter drop, said Arnold. "It was quite evident to me he had been harassed by some of his own people about our daylight bombing program and had to put up a fight on the subject," he added. "Whether they were fearful we would use our airplanes ineffectively in the daylight missions; whether they were afraid we would waste airplanes; or whether they feared we would do something they could not and had not been able to do, I do not know."

By the day of the Eaker–Churchill meeting, the Combined Chiefs of Staff still had failed to agree on an overall strategic concept for pressing the war. This failure to set pri-



Eighth Air Force commander Ira Eaker (here as lieutenant general) was key to overcoming British opposition to the AAF strategic air campaign. Churchill said Eaker convinced him "with skill and tenacity."

orities for 1943 threatened to scuttle the conference. As Slessor recalled, "Tempers were getting a little frayed." At this critical point, Slessor presented a compromise policy to Portal that amounted to a breakthrough.

Actually, the Combined Chiefs were not that far apart, but Slessor got to the heart of the problem. "The real trouble was that Americans obviously felt that we were concentrating all our interest and attention on defeating Germany and didn't care a damn about Japan, while our Chiefs of Staff suspected that the Americans intended to build up a tremendous campaign in the Pacific to the serious prejudice of our ability to defeat Germany," he said.

Slessor based his compromise proposal on Eaker's concept of an intensive strategic bombing campaign. The RAF would bomb at night, and the AAF would pound away during the day. He also suggested postponing a decision on the invasion of Europe.

With few alterations, the CCOS accepted this proposal.

On Jan. 21, 1943, the Combined Chiefs formally promulgated the Casablanca Directive, setting out a combined bomber offensive. Addressed to Eighth Air Force and RAF Bomber Command, the directive outlined the major objective of the bomber offensive as "the progressive destruction of the German military industrial and economic system, and the undermining of the morale of the German people to a point where their armed resistance is fatally weakened."

Eighth's Orders

Of seven points the Combined Chiefs emphasized in the directive, they aimed one specifically at Eaker's Eighth Air Force: "You should take every opportunity to attack Germany by day, to destroy objectives that are unsuitable for night attack, to sustain continuous pressure on German morale, to impose heavy losses on the German fighter force, and to contain German fighter strength away from the Russian and Mediterranean theaters of war." The Chiefs also directed the Eighth to provide the Allied armies, when they re-entered the continent, "all possible support in the manner most effective."

The Casablanca Directive described primary targets as submarine construction yards and bases, the aircraft industry, transportation, oil, and other industries. The immediate top priority was the Nazi submarine fleet, which was taking an enormous toll on Allied shipping and imperiled the entire Allied offensive in the west.

Subsequently, in June 1943, the Combined Chiefs approved the so-called "Point-blank Directive." That directive pinpointed fighter aircraft production as a major target and designated a complex that, if badly damaged, would help make the planned Allied invasion a success.

The Combined Chiefs deliberately had crafted the Casablanca Directive to allow both the AAF and RAF sufficient flexibility to pursue their own bombing doctrines and, at the same time, set the stage for a cross-channel strike.

However, the final overall 1943 strategy amounted to a victory for the British Mediterranean strategy. The Allies would invade Sicily next, followed by the effort to knock Italy out of the war. Preparations in England would continue for the cross-channel strike, but the invasion was on hold—a blow to the American strategy championed by Marshall.

Although the conference "was more or less a rat race, out of it I think there is a definite understanding between the British and ourselves as to the conduct of the war in future," said Arnold. For starters, Arnold emphasized to Eaker the absolute importance of starting to attack targets in Germany. By the end of January, Eaker had sent the first Eighth Air Force bombing mission over Germany.

After Casablanca, Arnold wrote to Spaatz: "You and Ira were both a great help to me at Casablanca. I don't know what I would have done without you."

The question of whether the Army Air Forces would continue daylight bombing was settled, allowing the strategic air campaign to go ahead and intensify.

The Casablanca Directive was "one of the finest air documents of the entire war," emphasized Maj. Gen. Haywood S. Hansell Jr., one of the AAF's outstanding war planners. In retrospect, Hansell concluded, if the AAF been forced into night bombing, the entire course of the war might have been different. It would certainly have been almost impossible to defeat the Luftwaffe, and the success of the Normandy invasion would have been jeopardized.

The decision at Casablanca marked the beginning of the end for Nazi Germany. ■

Herman S. Wolk is senior historian in the Air Force History Support Office. He is the author of the Struggle for Air Force Independence, 1943–1947 *(1997), and a coauthor of* Winged Shield, Winged Sword: A History of the United States Air Force *(1997). His most recent article for* Air Force *Magazine, "American Chieftains," appeared in the September 2002 issue.*