He built Bomber Command into a mighty force, but his reputation has suffered.

Bomber Harris

By Rebecca Grant

Photo by Leonard McCombe/Picture Post/Getty Images

RAF Air Marshal Harris and Royal Navy officials go over plans to use RAF bombers to drop mines. Bomber Harris is at the top of the list of controversial World War II airmen.

IN THE gallery of controversial Western military airmen, a few names truly stand out. At the top of this list is Bomber Harris.

Sir Arthur Travers Harris, Marshal of the Royal Air Force, was the head of RAF Bomber Command in the period 1942 through 1945. During that time, the RAF dropped almost a million tons of bombs. Half fell on German cities.

Harris is forever linked with images of the destruction of German cultural landmarks. His outspoken advocacy of razing German cities and winning the war with bomber offensives made him a polarizing public figure even during that all-out, no-holds-barred fight to the finish.

Those World War II exploits have echoed far beyond 1945. When admirers erected a statue of Harris in London in 1992, mobs of protesters took to the streets in both Britain and Germany.

The fact that Harris was a stern wartime commander only added to his reputation.

"Harris was incapable of deploying guile, diplomacy, or charm as weapons in his armory, and his approach was always direct to the point of rudeness," said Sebastian Cox, who edited Harris' long-classified postwar *Despatch* for publication in 1995.

No one doubts that Harris was hard to take, but one cannot give a fair assessment without putting his actions in the proper context. His nightfighting fleets overcame poor equipment and training and pioneered such essentials of modern warfare as electronic countermeasures (ECM).

On the other hand, Harris also opposed the diversion of airpower to support the Normandy invasion, downplayed the need to bomb the German V-2 missile sites, and supported wide-area bombing of German cities with high explosives and incendiaries right through to the end of the war.

In a New Light

Harris' record is worth a reconsideration, however. For one thing, he faced major challenges building up the kind of Bomber Command that could produce such impressive operational results—including surprisingly effective support for land force operations in the last year of the war. Perhaps no airman had ever been given a more difficult job: to create from scarce resources a bomber force that would be the one sure means of taking the war directly to Nazi Germany. That was Harris' task from 1942 to 1945.

Harris was born in Cheltenham in 1892. His father was a civil servant in India. His mother was the daughter of an Army physician in Madras. Harris lived five years with his parents in India and then was sent to school in England. At age 18, he left school to make his career in Rhodesia. When Harris arrived in 1910, the British colony was rapidly expanding. Harris spent four

years working on farms until, in 1914, general war broke out in Europe.

Harris shipped out for the World War with a Rhodesian regiment, but, through an uncle, found his way into the Royal Flying Corps. Two weeks in the cockpit won him a pilot's license and an officer's appointment. Ten more hours of flying time at Upavon, over a two-month period, earned him full qualification in January 1916 and an assignment to the air base at Northolt to learn night flying against German Zeppelins.

The young Harris thrived in the dangerous night-flying environment. By September 1916, he was in command of a fighter squadron headed for France. However, 1916 was a difficult time for British aviators facing superior German Fokker monoplanes and pilots. By October 1916, Harris was on his way back home with a broken arm, an injury suffered during a crash landing.

He returned to the front in the summer of 1917 in time for the muddy stalemates at Passchendaele and Ypres. Harris became an ace that summer. Dogfighting over the trench lines left him with the impression that "if another war did occur, there must surely be a better way to fight it," according to recent Harris biographer Henry Probert.

Assignments in India, Iraq, Egypt, and on the Air Ministry staff followed. In the late 1930s, Harris made several trips to America in a liaison capacity and met Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, Ira C. Eaker, and other senior air leaders. He took charge of RAF 5 Group in September 1939, at the outset of World War II, and spent the war's first year improving the operational status of his bomber squadrons.

Harris set up formal training units, harped on maintenance, and chided RAF Fighter Command for its tendency to inadvertently shoot at friendly bombers.

In November 1940, he became deputy chief of the air staff, but he soon was off to Washington again, this time as head of the RAF delegation buying aircraft and arranging pilot training. He arrived in June 1941 and 10 days later found himself conferring with President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the White House after Nazi Germany, on June 22, invaded the Soviet Union.

Photo by Central Press/Getty Images

Harris visits with airmen at one of his units in 1943. He overcame major challenges to build Bomber Command into a force that could take the war to Nazi Germany.

In Washington, Harris befriended not only national leaders such as Roosevelt and Gen. George C. Marshall but also airmen such as Adm. John H. Towers, who offered a training facility in Florida for British pilots, and Jacqueline Cochrane, who volunteered her services as a ferry pilot.

"Where We Start"

Harris and his wife were in Washington when a shocked America received word of imperial Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. Harris resisted the pleas of Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson to cancel some RAF contracts and divert the materiel to US armed forces. When Assistant Secretary for Air Robert A. Lovett pointed out that the US Pacific Fleet was in dire straits, Harris had a calm reply: "So what?" A few days later, after hearing more grim news, he would simply say to Lovett, "This is where we start."

In February 1942, Harris returned to England as head of RAF Bomber Command. It was not a formidable force. Far from it. "During the early months of the war," Harris wrote in *Despatch*, "Bomber Command activities were limited to spasmodic attacks on enemy shipping on certain naval installations, and no strategic bombing of German targets took place."

An August 1941 report to Prime Minister Winston Churchill's War Cabinet used starker terms to criticize Bomber Command's performance to that point. Only one in every three bomber sorties produced attacks coming within five miles of the target, and many bombers were simply dropping their strings in the open countryside. Bomber Command in 1942 had on its books only 51 squadrons of about 20 bombers each. Moreover, 27 percent of the fleet was nonoperational due to re-equipping. (By spring 1945, Harris would have 108 squadrons with a nonoperational rate of less than one percent.)

Most of Bomber Command's aircraft were ill-suited for carrying heavy ordnance loads on deep raids. Harris counted 378 serviceable aircraft with crews, of which 69 were heavy bombers. Not a single Lancaster—the four-engine mainstay of the later war years—was yet on operational status.

Bomber Command competed for resources with Fighter Command, always far ahead in procurement priorities, and Coastal Command, which had bomber squadrons dedicated to English Channel activity and to the guarding of sea-lanes. Even so, Bomber Command was obligated to carrying out the sea mining mission. Harris backed it, but the mission ate into the forces he could assemble to attack Germany.

It took a while for his new command to make its mark.

Harris' own postwar report put Bomber Command's 1942 accuracy against German cities (Berlin ex-

cluded) at an average of just 33 percent. Only fair-weather raids counted—and "accuracy" was defined as bomb release within three miles of the aim point.

Bomber Command, despite shortcomings, was essential to Britain's war. In early 1942, the only thing grimmer than the feeble status of RAF Bomber Command was Britain's strategic position. It was still waging a war of national survival. The triumphs in North Africa were months away, and the Normandy invasion was more than two years in the future. Britain had no means of taking the war to Germany itself except for long-range bombing. With the Russians losing ground in the east, mounting stronger bomber offensives was also the only thing Britain could do to aid its new Soviet ally. The strategic, political, and moral climate called for action.

Born in the Blitz

With its prosecution of the Blitz against England, Germany already had set the precedent for all-out war. London was ablaze for 76 nights in a row in the fall of 1940. Churchill called for "an absolutely devastating, exterminating attack by very heavy bombers from this country upon the Nazi homeland." In 1941, Britain approved Air Staff policy that the RAF would seek to make German towns "physically uninhabitable" and to keep people "conscious of constant personal danger."

To Harris, Bomber Command was "the only means at the disposal of the Allies for striking at Germany itself and, as such, stood out as the central point in the Allied offensive strategy."

First, however, he had to conduct what he later called "a complete revolution in the employment no less than in the composition of the bomber force."

His most powerful ally in the quest to build up Bomber Command was none other than Churchill. By this time, the Prime Minister was warning the Air Staff not to place "unbounded confidence" in any one means of attack, but Churchill believed bombing Germany was "the most potent method of impairing the enemy's morale we can use at the present time."

Churchill was fond of inviting commanders to late-night dinners throughout the war. Harris used the social opportunities to build Churchill's trust, but he shrewdly condensed important war business and lobbying for bomber procurement into memoranda known as "minutes" so that Churchill could review and act on them.

At Bomber Command's High Wycombe headquarters, Harris proved quite the host to numerous visitors—up to and including the King. He kept his American contacts close—so close that Eaker, commander of Eighth Air Force, was a houseguest of the Harrises for several months.

Photo at top shows how successive RAF and US bomber strikes wrecked the vital Nazi rail center in Cologne. Above, Bomber Command aircrews stream across an RAF airfield after a successful raid on Berlin.

Harris was at heart an operational commander. He was briefed every morning on results and crew losses from the previous night's raids, and his main daily task was overall command of the bomber formations. Weather in England varied so much that targets often were not confirmed until late morning for a launch later that night. Harris' routine was to select targets and then leave remaining operational details to deputies, who would brief him on final plans for the raids.

Harris was a field commander in every sense of the word—responsible for execution decisions as well as all administrative tasks. For most of the war, he reported directly to the US-British Combined Chiefs of Staff, a status reserved for the likes

of Eisenhower, MacArthur, and Nimitz.

No to Precision

He had the power to determine Bomber Command's tactics and strategy. Painful early experiences with precision attacks convinced him that such raids were not feasible. One example was the Augsburg raid of April 17, 1942, in which Harris sent 12 Lancaster bombers to attack a U-boat engine factory in Germany. Penetrating precision in World War II was possible, but it required daylight and extremely low-level ingress. Of the 12 Lancasters sent against the target, only five returned.

Clearly, Bomber Command could not regularly sustain nearly 60 percent attrition in every raid.

For most of 1942, Harris deliberately scaled back operations over Europe to concentrate on giving his crews better training. Moreover, 1942 and 1943 also brought a windfall of sophisticated technology. New radar navigation aids provided beam navigation and, later, electronic mapping of target areas. Among these systems, the biggest star was an item called H2S, which yielded "excellent reproduction of coastlines and inland waterways and far better resolution of towns and built-up areas, thus facilitating accurate identification," wrote Group Capt. Dudley Saward, Harris' chief radar officer at Bomber Command.

These British scientific outpourings gave Bomber Command a higher degree of reliability in target acquisition.

Still, Harris favored night bombing, because German air defenses were thick and strong. He believed in massed raids for the same reason. In his view, raids of at least 300 bombers would improve survivability by saturating radar-controlled anti-aircraft guns and German night fighters, which were equipped with cockpit radar sets. Serial raids of 700 to 800 bombers were preferred.

To Harris, city bombing was a tactical necessity with strategic payoff. He believed it "kept alive the spark of hope, and therefore of resistance, among the workers of occupied Europe." Moreover, according to *Despatch,* city bombing impeded German war production and operational maneuver. For example, Harris concluded that attacks on the Reich cities compelled Germany to draw back versatile anti-aircraft guns and fighters from the front and helped the Allies achieve air superiority.

© Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS

The Americans Eaker (left) and Spaatz (center) exchange pleasantries with Harris in Britain. Harris forged close ties with American airmen, who often shared his views on airpower tactics and strategy.

Bomber Command's "main offensive" ran from March 1943 through March 1944. The "Oboe" navigation aid, with its 300-mile range, made possible the Battle of the Ruhr. US Army Air Forces picked up the day bombing missions in strength.

H2S debuted in the summer of 1943, and Bomber Command's sortie rates shot up. Still, Harris considered the H2S to be "incapable of really precise marking," meaning that, in his view, area bombing was still the only option.

At the end of July 1943, the RAF deployed Window—the first chaff ECM—during a series of heavy raids on Hamburg.

Overall, Harris was pleased. "For the first time, the command found itself in a position, under suitable conditions, to inflict severe material damage on almost any industrial center in Germany."

Errors of Judgment

When Harris had finally molded Bomber Command into an efficient organization for massed night bomber raids, he wanted to use his crews for nothing else. This led in 1943 and 1944 to errors of judgment that are hard to explain away.

One problem was his antipathy toward targeting German industry outside of the city industrial areas. To Harris, it was a piecemeal approach unlikely to yield results. "I do not believe in 'panacea' targets, e.g., oil, rubber, ball bearings," Harris wrote in April 1943. "Specializing on one such [industry] means that the enemy concentrates all his defenses, and nothing else in Germany, including morale and housing, is likely to suffer."

At least in the beginning, Harris took little interest in the planned invasion of Normandy. He resisted placing Bomber Command under Eisenhower's operational control. Along with Spaatz, Harris had doubts about whether Ike's plan to use airpower to choke and channel German movement would work. He argued that his night-bombing crews were not trained to go after railway-type targets.

Harris worried that the Allies made an "irremediable error" by "diverting our best weapon from the military function for which it has been equipped and trained to that which it cannot effectively carry out."

Allied politics and concerns over French casualties deepened the dispute. By late March, it had become so bitter that Eisenhower threatened to resign his command unless the strategic air forces came over to his control. Ultimately, they did, with both Eighth Air Force and Bomber Command chopped to Eisen-

© Hulton-Deutsch Collection /CORBIS

Critics questioned the morality of city bombing, but Harris maintained that, if his command had been at full strength earlier, his bombing strategy could have ended the war without a massive land invasion.

hower from mid-April to August 1944.

Having lost the battle, Harris threw himself and his command into helping win the war, and, ultimately, he wrote with pride of Bomber Command's contributions to D-Day success. By D-Day, "all 37 of the railway centers assigned to Bomber Command had been damaged to such an extent that no further attention from heavy bombers was deemed necessary," Harris wrote.

Proud Nonetheless

In October 1945, Harris wrote, "The best indication of the success of the three months' offensive against the railways is the fact that the enemy's major reinforcements reached the battlefront too late to prevent the firm establishment of the invading armies in Normandy. When they did percolate through to the front, they found themselves operating in conditions of extreme disadvantage."

When it was all over, Eisenhower let Harris off with no hard feelings. He later wrote in his memoirs, "Even Harris, who had originally been known as the individual who wanted to win the war with bombing alone, [became] extremely proud of his membership in the Allied team."

Harris also willingly continued close support for the land campaign. Bomber Command sent 1,000 sorties to break a British deadlock with German Panzers at Caen, France, on July 18, 1944. In October, he dedicated 243 of his precious Lancasters to breaching operations off the coast of the Netherlands at the Walcheren Island fortress, another thorn in the side of the Allies.

During the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944, his bombers attacked the St. Vith road junction, rerouting a German division on its way to reinforce Bastogne, Belgium. Late March 1945 found Bomber Command crews attacking railways, bridges, and enemy troop concentrations as 21st Army Group crossed the Rhine. Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery's message extended to Harris what he called "my grateful appreciation for the quite magnificent cooperation you have given us in the Battle of the Rhine."

Harris, by this time, had enough bombers and crews at his disposal to both support Eisenhower and wage all-out war on German cities. Released from Ike's control in August, Bomber Command resumed city attacks with full force. In November 1944, RAF crews delivered 347,538 tons of bombs—exceeding the total of 339,179 tons dropped in all of 1942.

Statistically, it was an epic performance. Bomber Command sorties soared from an average of fewer than 2,000 per month in 1939-41 to 3,161 in 1942, 5,422 in 1943, 13,904 in 1944, and 16,871 in early 1945.

Using vast quantities of incendiary bombs, Bomber Command aircraft targeted cities such as Cologne in "thousand-bomber" raids. The February 1945 attack on Dresden crippled that historic city, making it one of the most controversial episodes of World War II. (See "The Dresden Legend," October 2004, p. 64.)

Questions about the morality of city bombing have remained the sticking point in the reputation of Harris, not that it bothered him. He maintained that, if only Bomber Command had been at full strength a year or so earlier, it undoubtedly would have ended the war in Europe as abruptly as US bombing ended the war in the Pacific—"without need of a land invasion."

Harris' passionate commitment to nighttime area bombing does not fit well in this age of precision airpower. It was almost as unpopular in the 1940s. History began to treat him badly right away. Clement Attlee's Labor government denied him a peerage, even though his two predecessors at Bomber Command got them. Harris had to wait for Churchill's return to power before he could become Sir Arthur.

After the war, he enjoyed almost 40 years of business success and contact with old colleagues until his death in 1984.

Harris' well-known blind spots have tended to bar him in many assessments from membership in the top ranks of airmen. Yet those who would judge him might do well to remember that Harris was an airman who saw London on fire from end to end on the night of Dec. 29, 1940. Only the dome of St. Paul's near the Air Ministry offices stood out untouched against the flames and smoke. To Harris, Bomber Command was the only weapon that could strike back. History has reason to treat Harris with caution, but final judgment is best left to those who saw what he saw. ■

Rebecca Grant is a contributing editor of Air Force *Magazine. She is president of IRIS Independent Research in Washington, D.C., and has worked for RAND, the Secretary of the Air Force, and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. Grant is a fellow of the Eaker Institute for Aerospace Concepts, the public policy and research arm of the Air Force Association's Aerospace Education Foundation. Her most recent article, "Air Warfare in Transition," appeared in the December 2004 issue.*