

Keeper File

Airpower Was Decisive

The war with Hitler was in its final months when President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered up a survey. He wanted to know the details of what Allied airpower had done to Nazi Germany and its military capabilities. Soon, the project had drawn in 350 officers, 500 enlisted personnel, and 300 civilians, and had acquired a name—the United States Strategic Bombing Survey. The first fruit was a 13,000-word “Summary Report” of operations in Europe, based upon data filling more than 200 volumes of research. This was a unique record of damage inflicted on everything from oil refineries to railways. Its conclusion about the contribution of airpower was unequivocal: “Allied airpower was decisive in the war in Western Europe.”

The new relation of airpower to strategy presents one of the distinguishing contrasts between this war and the last. Airpower in the last war was in its infancy. The new role of three-dimensional warfare was even then foreseen by a few farsighted men, but planes were insufficient in quality and quantity to permit much more than occasional brilliant assistance to the ground forces.

Airpower in the European phase of this war reached a stage of full adolescence, a stage marked by rapid development in planes, armament, equipment, tactics, and concepts of strategic employment, and by an extraordinary increase in the effort allocated to it by all the major contestants. England devoted 40 to 50 percent of her war production to her air forces, Germany 40 percent, and the United States 35 percent.

Nevertheless, at the end of hostilities in Europe, weapons, tactics, and strategy were still in a state of rapid development. Airpower had not yet reached maturity, and all conclusions drawn from experience in the European Theatre must be considered subject to change. No one should assume that because certain things were effective or not effective, the same would be true under other circumstances and other conditions.

In the European war, Allied airpower was called upon to play many roles—partner with the Navy over the sea-lanes; partner with the Army in ground battle; partner with both on the invasion beaches; reconnaissance photographer for all; mover of troops and critical supplies; and attacker of the enemy’s vital strength far behind the battle line.

In the attack by Allied airpower, almost 2,700,000 tons of bombs were dropped; more than 1,440,000 bomber sorties and 2,680,000 fighter sorties were flown. The number of combat planes reached a peak of some 28,000, and, at the maximum, 1,300,000 men were in combat commands. The number of men lost in air action was 79,265 Americans and 79,281 British. (Note: All RAF statistics are preliminary or tentative.) More than 18,000 American and 22,000 British planes were lost or damaged beyond repair.

In the wake of these attacks, there are great paths of destruction. In Germany, 3,600,000 dwelling units, approximately 20 percent of the total, were destroyed or heavily damaged. Survey estimates show some 300,000 civilians killed and 780,000 wounded. The number made homeless aggregates 7,500,000. The principal German cities have been largely reduced to hollow walls and piles of rubble. German industry is bruised and temporarily paralyzed. These are the scars across the face of the enemy, the preface to the victory that followed.

How air supremacy was achieved and the results which followed from its exploitation are the subject of this summary report. The use of airpower cannot properly be considered, however,

The United States Strategic Bombing Survey: Summary Report (European War)

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except in conjunction with the broad plans and strategy under which the war was conducted. ...

The foregoing pages tell of the results achieved by Allied airpower, in each of its several roles in the war in Europe. It remains to look at the results as a whole and to seek such signposts as may be of guidance to the future.

Allied airpower was decisive in the war in Western Europe. Hindsight inevitably suggests that it might have been employed differently or better in some respects. Nevertheless, it was decisive. In the air, its victory was complete. At sea, its contribution, combined with naval power, brought an end to the enemy’s greatest naval threat—the U-boat; on land, it helped turn the tide overwhelmingly in favor of Allied ground forces. Its power and superiority made possible the success of the invasion. It brought the economy which sustained the enemy’s armed forces to virtual collapse, although the full effects of this collapse had not reached the enemy’s front lines when they were overrun by Allied forces. It brought home to the German people the full impact of modern war with all its horror and suffering. Its imprint on the German nation will be lasting. ...

The air has become a highway which has brought within easy access every point on the Earth’s surface—a highway to be traveled in peace, and in war, over distances without limit, at ever increasing speed. The rapid developments in the European war foreshadow further exploration of its potentialities. Continued development is indicated in the machines and in the weapons which will travel the reaches of this highway. The outstanding significance of the air in modern warfare is recognized by all who participated in the war in Europe or who have had an opportunity to evaluate the results of aerial offensive. These are facts which must govern the place accorded airpower in plans for coordination and organization of our resources and skills for national defense. ■