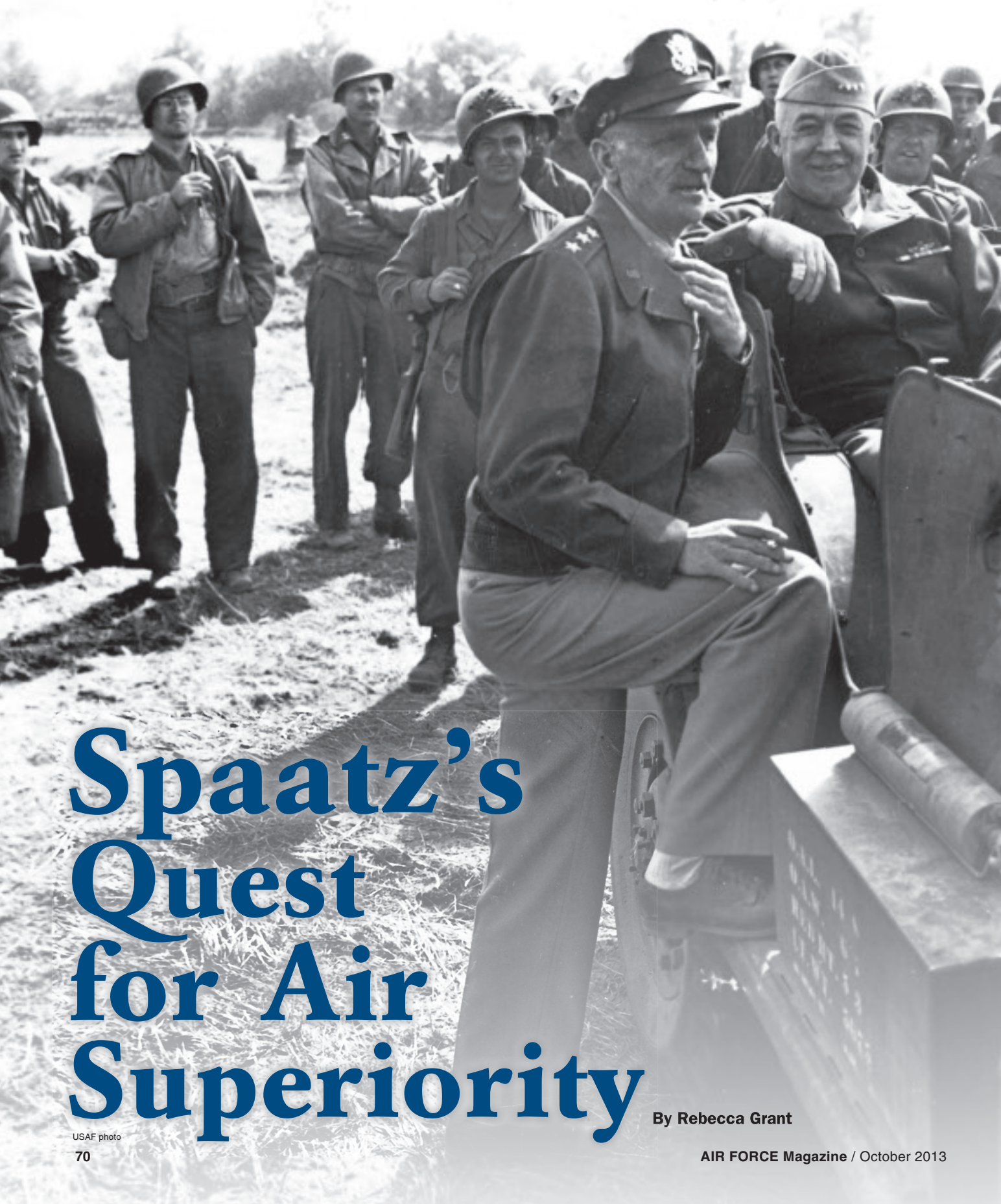


The legendary airman accomplished a signature achievement in the skies over Europe.



# Spaatz's Quest for Air Superiority

By Rebecca Grant

USAF photo



**O**n Dec. 28, 1943, Lt. Gen. Carl A. “Tooey” Spaatz took off from North Africa on his command airplane, a B-17 named *Boops*

for his daughter Carla, age 11. After a year in the Mediterranean theater, Spaatz was taking over as commander, US Strategic Air Forces in Europe.

He was the personal choice of US Army Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower. “Wouldn’t take anyone else,” Gen. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold noted after a private meeting with the newly selected supreme allied commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force. When it was all over, Eisenhower wrote, “On every succeeding day of almost three years of active war I had new reasons for thanking the gods of war and the War Department for giving me ‘Tooey’ Spaatz.”

But that was in the future. As 1943 drew to a close, the long-planned invasion of France was barely six months away, and the Allies were behind in their most immediate task: winning air superiority in Europe by battering down the Luftwaffe. The task fell to Spaatz.

Winning air superiority was the first job of an air force. The task was extremely difficult, yet it could not have fallen on more capable shoulders.

While remembered today as the first USAF Chief of Staff, or as a World War II bomber baron who launched massive offensives such as Big Week in February 1944, Spaatz’s critical wartime achievement was coming from behind to win air superiority over the Luftwaffe.

Air superiority then was not like it is in the modern era, where few enemy aircraft disturb the skies. Air superiority in Europe in 1944 was a costlier and more transient phenomenon. It had eluded the Allies and was of supreme importance to the liberation of Europe.

Spaatz was well-acquainted with the expectations for air superiority. In 1939, he joined Major General Arnold’s staff in the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps at the Pentagon. He then witnessed the beginning of the Blitz while on assignment in London in 1940. Back in Washington, he headed a planning division and then became chief of the air staff. The ambitious rush production of warplanes in AWPD-1 was laid out under his authority.

**Lt. Gen. Carl Spaatz (standing), then commander of US Strategic Air Forces in Europe, and USAAF commander Gen. Henry Arnold (in jeep) visit a landing strip in France during World War II.**

In the process, Brigadier General Spaatz got to know another young brigadier doing planning for Army Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall. This was Eisenhower.

At the time, the Americans were sketching out a cross-Channel attack for as early as October 1942. Marshall insisted on air cover to protect invasion beaches and the advance inland. Here, in the dark days of early 1942, Spaatz set the expectations for air superiority, or as he would have termed it, air supremacy.

“The most salient point of Spaatz’s plans was the emphasis on destroying the Luftwaffe rather than on conducting a strategic bombing campaign against the German war economy,” observed Richard G. Davis in his biography *Spaatz and the Air War in Europe*.

Those plans would soon be postponed in favor of invading North Africa. For a year, Spaatz worked with Eisenhower to master air and ground employment and win battles in the Mediterranean theater. Eisenhower was appointed supreme

figured out that fighter production needed to be a top priority. Deliveries rose from 753 for the first half of 1943 to 851 for the final six months of the year.

The other side of German strategy was to inflict loss rates on the Allies to compensate for increasing Allied production.

Albert Speer noted there was “no need to think in terms of destroying all enemy bomber planes.” High losses demoralized and depleted crews. “Therefore, enemy superiority in materiel and men could be balanced out by the greatest losses,” Speer opined after the war.

Loss rates through 1943 were just as bad as Speer thought. Sixty B-17s went down on the final Schweinfurt raid of the year on Oct. 14, 1943. From July to November, the loss rate averaged 3.8 percent per mission. At that rate, bomber crews flying the allotted 25 missions would suffer a casualty rate of 64 out of every 100 men.

The fighter squadrons were lacking, too. Range limits still leashed them to limited escort duty. The rugged P-47

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commander for the Normandy invasion and in December 1943 he ordered Spaatz back to England.

### Grim Toll

All plans for Operation Overlord—the Allied invasion of German-occupied Western Europe—hinged on air superiority. Eisenhower described it as “almost on faith” that combined air forces would be able to provide overpowering force.

However, the failure to attain air superiority was building to a crisis. Aviators recognized this. The classified monthly report, the Army Air Forces “Impact,” put it in the most charitable terms. The period from mid-1942 to mid-1943, “with the air forces opposing each other about equal in strength, was generally a stalemate.”

Several problems were piling up. The Germans actually had more aircraft in Western Europe’s skies in late 1943 than they did in early 1942. First, they moved more fighters to the Western front. Numbers increased from 591 single-engine fighters in theater in mid-1943 to more than 700 by Oct. 5. The Germans had also

could not escort to a radius much beyond 300 miles. Men, aircraft, and equipment flowed into theater, but Eighth Air Force had not yet found the tactical formula to accomplish its mission.

Official historians Wesley F. Craven and James L. Cate summed up the desperate situation: “The fact was that the Eighth Air Force had for the time being lost air superiority over Germany.”

Spaatz was coming back to England to effect a turnaround. Air superiority to Spaatz and Eisenhower was focused on the goal of allowing other air operations deemed essential for Overlord. Principally, these were to clear opposition so that a highly precise campaign could be conducted, at low altitude, on the transportation system in France. Railways and bridges were the top targets.

This would also allow fighter-bomber reconnaissance to harass and halt German reinforcements after the landing. To do all this, the first aim as codified in the Pointblank directive of 1943 was to render the Luftwaffe incapable of effective resistance. That did not mean emptying the

skies, but it meant the landings would not hang in the balance while a battle raged for air control. Hence, the stalemate in place in December 1943 was unacceptable.

Spaatz knew what it meant to take the offensive. During World War I, he'd spent a year running training at the large US base at Issoudun in France. While there, he'd seen the high losses among trainee pilots both from accidents and combat operations. He also found a way to attach himself on temporary duty to a combat unit and flew in the major air battle at St. Mihiel in September 1918 and again during the Meuse-Argonne action later that month.

His last sortie with the 13th Aero Squadron had been memorable: Major Spaatz chased and shot down two Fokkers. In the process, he became target-fixated, and other Fokkers jumped him. A more experienced aviator came to his rescue and shooed them off Spaatz's tail. However, he was out of fuel and set the ship down in no-man's land. Spaatz later told the story this way: He downed three airplanes—"two German and my own."

Years later, Spaatz had observed in detail how fighters were employed by the RAF in the Battle of Britain. Destroying fighters in the air was essential, he concluded. "Control of the air would have to be won by shooting the German planes out of the skies in air-to-air battles," summed up another biographer, David Mets.

The Spaatz doctrine for air superiority was to work every angle. Factory attacks alone could not halt production permanently, given the dispersal of the German aircraft industry. So Spaatz resolved to restrict fuel, limit their training, blow up their bases, and most of all, send big raids to targets the German fighter pilots had to defend in the air.

He started his shake-up in January 1944. First, he changed the way fighters were employed. Doctrine at the time called for fighters to act as escorts as far as their fuel range allowed. This translated into mighty air battles but only at the margins of German control of the air. Spaatz altered the strategy and sent bombers and fighters against targets chosen to lure out the Luftwaffe. Once up in the air, the fighters went on the attack.

The concept was called loose escort. In practice, fighters were now free to leave the bomber boxes to pursue and destroy German aircraft. The tactic "revolutionized daylight air warfare over Germany," said biographer Davis in a recent essay on Spaatz. "American P-51s, P-38s, and P-47s pursued and destroyed the Luftwaffe's day fighter force from the tops of the clouds



USAF photos

**Above: Spaatz in front of a Martin trainer during pilot training in California. Below: A B-17 loses its wing to fire from an Me 262 over Germany during World War II. Spaatz expanded the bombing campaign to include not only aircraft production facilities but fuel depots, bases, and big raids on tempting targets the Germans were forced to defend in the air.**



to the tops of the trees and even as they landed and took off.”

At the same time, Spaatz decided to increase attacks on Luftwaffe bases. Such attacks—today a cornerstone of offensive counterair doctrine—had worked in the Mediterranean but had been less effective to date in Europe. Still, Spaatz was ready to try it again.

“My tendency will be to place a little bit more emphasis upon swatting the enemy on his airdromes whenever possible,” he wrote.

Perhaps as important, he gathered the bulk of the new P-51s arriving in theater under Eighth Air Force. Originally, P-51s were sent both to the ground-attack specialists in Ninth Air Force and to the Eighth. Spaatz fought the position through the complicated air command structure and ended up with seven groups of P-51s for Eighth Air Force and two for the Ninth. Thus the mass formations of bombers and fighters totaling hundreds of aircraft were serving one prime objective: destruction of the German air force.

Through it all, Spaatz was noted for his equanimity and modest nature. He could also be a stern taskmaster—as Maj. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle discovered.

Soon after Spaatz elevated Doolittle to command of Eighth Air Force, Doolittle had to abort not one but two massed bomber raids when weather was suddenly forecast to drop below minimums at the home airfields in England. Naturally, the weather didn’t break, and the returning initial formations landed in bright sunshine.

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Doolittle later wrote, “My heart sank.” He defended his decision by saying he did not want to allow an uncalculated risk. Spaatz’s reaction was “cryptically noncommittal.”

Later, Spaatz and Doolittle were flying around England on an inspection tour when the fog moved in. They barely landed on an unprepared field. Spaatz was quick to admit, “You were right, Jim. I see what you mean about uncalculated risks.”

### Big Week

Dogged by bad weather, Spaatz still had not yet struck the much-awaited hard blows against the German air force. His opportunity came in mid-February 1944. Weather conditions were suitable for Operation Argument, otherwise known as Big Week. From Feb. 20 to 26, 1944, USAAF and the RAF launched mass bomber offensives on German aircraft production. Bombers ranged near the edge of their combat radii from Hamburg to Leipzig, Dresden, and Nuremberg.

The first set of targets selected were 12 major assembly and component plants for German Me 109s, Me 110s, Ju 88s, FW 190s, and other German fighters. Scheduled for the attack on Feb. 20 were

16 bomber wings and 17 fighter groups. This was the big chance, and Spaatz was willing to take the risk of losing up to 200 bombers to carry it out.

On the eve of the attack, Spaatz alone had to make one of the toughest decisions of his career. Commanders around England were calling in to express reservations about weather and icing conditions and how they would affect the strike. Competing priorities in supporting the Anzio beachhead and tussles with the RAF also conspired to put a damper on plans.

“The risks were so great and the conditions so unfavorable that none of the subordinate commanders was willing to take the responsibility for the launch,” noted one of the brigadiers present the night before the mission. “General Spaatz quietly and firmly issued the order to go.”

Of the 941 bombers that flew sorties, amazingly, only 21 were lost that night. Spaatz was more than vindicated.

Total losses for Big Week tallied 158 bombers for Eighth Air Force and 89 for Fifteenth Air Force, plus 28 fighters. Results were spectacular. Nearly 70 percent of the original buildings used for fighter production were destroyed. Estimates showed a total of 545 German fighters destroyed from January through Feb. 29, 1944.

By late March 1944, the question of when to begin direct air preparation of the battlefield grew urgent. All commanders knew that at some point, the weight of airpower would shift. Perhaps Spaatz’s most difficult task was sticking to the air superiority campaign, which was after all the long-agreed precondition for the invasion. How long could he hold on to the priorities?

The most serious disputes occurred over when and how to attack railways leading to the invasion area that might be used by Germans to bring rapid reinforcements. The plan—which turned out to be a success—began with all sorts of opposition and debate. Actual selection of targets for US and RAF bombers was accomplished through a complex, combined process that often involved the joint chiefs of staff, Eisenhower, and even Churchill and Roosevelt. As a result, the railway plan debate took up a good deal of high-level time.

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*Spaatz (seated second from left) and Gen. Jimmy Doolittle (to his left) during an after-action discussion with crews from the 303rd Bombardment Group after a raid on an oil refinery in Halle, Germany.*



**A B-26 flies over an invasion beach in the early morning hours of D-Day. Spaatz's campaign to fuel-starve the Luftwaffe had a profound effect on the land battle, said Gen. Dwight Eisenhower.**

Matters came to a head during a meeting on March 25, 1944. It fell to Spaatz to present the alternative view, namely, continuing to target German oil supplies for a time longer. His top priority was to assure air supremacy at the time of the Allied assault.

Oil remained a prime target for its potentially choking effect and for another reason: Spaatz thought the oil targets were far better bait. He felt the Luftwaffe would not bother coming up to defend French rail hubs.

"We believe they will defend oil to their last fighter," Spaatz said in the alternative plan presented to the top US and British commanders.

Spaatz had won his point anyway. Eisenhower had put off for more than a month the decision to switch to rail targeting. This four-star stall had already given Spaatz extensive leeway to finish his quest for air superiority.

March was another month of heavy losses in the Luftwaffe.

In the end, Eisenhower decided to pursue both approaches. He moved forward with the rail and transport plan, but Spaatz also continued his conquest of the Luftwaffe. "Spaatz convinced me that, as Germany became progressively embarrassed by her diminishing oil reserves, the effect upon the land battle would be most profound," Ike explained.

Eisenhower took command of the air force in the run up to D-Day. He continued to approve Spaatz's mass assaults on

oil targets and they delivered knockout blows. One such armada attacked synthetic oil targets on May 12, 1944, with 886 bombers and 735 escort fighters pitted against German defenses. The cost was 46 Eighth Air Force bombers, 10 fighters, and their crews.

Other attacks followed, delivering immediate results cramping oil production and taking out yet more German fighters.

### **Bloody Victory**

*Life* magazine ran Spaatz on the cover of its May 29, 1944, issue, the week before the invasion. The portrait showed what aides called his poker face. Spaatz's tired eyes and gaunt face hinted at the effort of the air battle. It wasn't his first or his last major magazine cover, but it marked a unique moment for him. As the invasion approached, every indication showed that the Luftwaffe could not contest the skies.

The invasion date was set for June 5, 1944. Then, foul weather descended. Navy commanders told Eisenhower they could handle the rough seas. British Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery offered to take the invasion force in without air cover. Eisenhower overruled him. His deputy, Air Vice Marshal Arthur W. Tedder, recorded that Eisenhower thought "the operation was only feasible in its present form because of our

very great air superiority." According to Tedder, Eisenhower declared that if the air forces could not operate, then the operation must be postponed. The invasion would wait one more day.

On June 6, Spaatz had his victory. "The battle for air supremacy over the beachhead never occurred," noted Davis.

"The Luftwaffe refused the challenge," noted Craven and Cate's official history. "The concentrated attacks on the Luftwaffe, production, and product, paid the dividends that we always envisioned, the dividend being beyond expectation," summed up Spaatz himself. "During the entire first day of the invasion, enemy opposition in the air, either fighter or bomber, was next to nil."

With a force estimated between 50 and 120 fighters, the German air force in the Normandy area managed some 250 sorties.

This kind of air superiority was not smooth or easy. Flak and some air combat took down 71 US aircraft. Yet it was exactly what Eisenhower counted on to give the landings a chance for success and hold off a German counterattack.

From the perspective of six months earlier, the victory in the air was a profound achievement.

It is not one usually attributed to Spaatz, however. Eisenhower had an explanation for that. "He shunned the limelight and was so modest and retiring that the public probably never became fully cognizant of his value," Eisenhower said of Spaatz.

After VE day, Spaatz transferred to the Pacific. He fought postwar battles, too, to ensure the birth of an independent Air Force.

Spaatz's experience stands as a reminder that air superiority is not static but has many different meanings. The most important ingredient in defining it is the expectation of the joint force commander—in this case, Eisenhower. For Spaatz, what he gained was a form of working air superiority that gradually increased to dominance but never without risk and cost. The cost was high, but the dividend, as he put it, was beyond expectation.

Spaatz's achievement is also a reminder of what top commanders have acknowledged for decades: The American way of war is possible only with air superiority. As challenges rise again in the Pacific and elsewhere, the finesse and flexibility of Spaatz's singular achievement stands out all the more. ■

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