

OPERATION ARGUMENT

by

Jay Irwin

&

Olivia Tautkus

Part 1

Operation ARGUMENT, also known as “Big Week,” was one of the largest and most coordinated attacks on the German aircraft industry during World War II. In the days and weeks prior to OVERLORD (the D-Day invasion of June 6, 1944), the Allied Command determined that gaining dominance over German skies would be the surest way to decrease the number of American casualties during that operation. Thus Operation ARGUMENT was born. It would be left to the Nazi forces to defend air superiority over Germany.

It is important to introduce the principle actors of each belligerent force to form a fuller picture of Operation ARGUMENT. Upon finally committing to execute OVERLORD, President Franklin Roosevelt appointed General Eisenhower, then in Tunis¹ directing North African operations,² to supreme command of operations. Eisenhower assumed command in London at the Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF). Eisenhower culled competent officers from his former African and Mediterranean operations.³ In January of 1944 he appointed Lt. Gen. Carl Spaatz to head the United States Strategic Air Forces (USSTAF).⁴ Gen. James H. Doolittle was appointed to command the Eighth Air Force,⁵ with Gen. William Kepner already head of the Fighter Command.⁶ Gen. Lewis Brereton was currently head of the Ninth Air Force⁷ which had been recently re-established in the UK.⁸ Both Doolittle and Brereton reported to Gen. Spaatz. The Fifteenth Air Force, based in Bari, Italy⁹ had been under the command of Gen. Nathan F. Twining since November of 1943.¹⁰ Gen. Twining reported to Gen. Ira Eaker, commander of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces.¹¹ The Royal Air Force (RAF) Bomber Command, under Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris¹² and his superior, Allied Expeditionary Air Force (AEAF) Air Commander in Chief Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory¹³ were to contribute all spare efforts from OVERLORD planning to the success of ARGUMENT.¹⁴

The German air force (GAF), Luftwaffe, was headed by Hermann Goering of the Reichsluftfahrtministerium – the Reich Air Ministry (RLM). Goering had been a flying ace in World War I and one of Hitler’s earliest recruits to the Nazi Party. The most significant segment

¹ Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, eds., *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, Wesley vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) 4-5.

² George H. Mayer, “Eisenhower, Dwight David,” in *Encyclopedia Americana*, <http://ap.grolier.com/article?assetid=0139680-00> accessed 10 October 2008.

³ Forces, 4-7.

⁴ The Spaatz Association, Inc. “Carl A. Spaatz,” <http://www.spaatz.org/gen/spaatzbio.html> accessed 10 October 2008.

⁵ Arlington National Cemetery, “James Harold Doolittle,” <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/jdoolitt.htm> accessed 10 October 2008.

⁶ U.S. Air Force, “Lieutenant General William E. Kepner,” *U.S. Air Force Military Biographies: Annual 2004* http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0RBE/is_2004_Annual/ai_n8566955, accessed 10 October 2008, and Forces, 32.

⁷ Forces, 32.

⁸ Major Jon M. Sutterfield, “How Logistics Made Big Week Big,” in *Air Force Journal of Logistics*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Air Force, U.S. Government Printing Office) Vol. 24 No.2, 8.

⁹ U.S. Air Force, “The Fifteenth Air Force: A Strategic Punch from the Mediterranean,” <http://www.usaaf.net/ww2/africa/africapg5.htm> accessed 10 October 2008.

¹⁰ Arlington National Cemetery, “Nathan Farragut Twining,” <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/ntwining.htm> accessed 10 October 2008.

¹¹ Forces, 7.

¹² Forces, 35.

¹³ Forces, 5.

¹⁴ Forces, 28.

of German aircraft during Operation ARGUMENT was fighters, whose operations were headed by Gen. Adolf Galland. Equally important was the head of GAF aircraft production, Albert Speer.¹⁵ It is important to note here that initial Nazi use of the Luftwaffe had been primarily to cover ground forces. It is theorized that the high command of the Reich did not anticipate that long range bombers would be needed in conflicts with Germany's immediate neighbors, and so did not initially invest heavily in their production.¹⁶

Prior to the initial drafting of Operation ARGUMENT in November of 1943,¹⁷ the Eighth, Ninth and Fifteenth Air Forces coordinated to attack German aircraft and ball bearing manufacturing plants earlier that year. The lessons learned on both sides from those attacks would affect the overall significance of ARGUMENT. The German forces countered the 1943 bombings by developing a gun which could be mounted on the roof of a fighter and safely fired from the blind spot of Allied bombers' gun defenses.¹⁸ After devastating losses during the 1943 bombing missions, the inadequacy of B-17 and B-24 bomber defenses without full fighter escort became abundantly clear.¹⁹ These losses spurred American air forces to focus on development of a fighter that could escort bombers during the entire mission. The P-38 fighters proved that they could provide long range escort and the P-47 fighters were modified with additional tanks to increase their range.²⁰ The P-51 Mustang, whose design flaw of an small engine was fixed and drop tanks added, proved capable of long range escort and became one of the best fighters during ARGUMENT.²¹ Additionally, problems with support logistics for the Eighth and Ninth were ironed out so that support for the ARGUMENT missions ran more smoothly.²² German manufacturing also reacted to the increased range of American bombing missions. After the devastating attacks on the ball bearing plants at Schweinfurt on 17 August and 14 October 1943, operations at Schweinfurt and elsewhere were spread out to smaller plants and various other measures were implemented to bomb-proof facilities.²³ At the opening of Operation ARGUMENT, the American objective was to gain air superiority by the almost complete destruction of German aircraft and ball bearing manufacturing plants. The German objective was to retain air superiority over Germany to protect its people and industry by using its fighter force.

Part 2

The final draft of Operation ARGUMENT was put on paper in the winter of 1943 as part of the POINTBLANK directive to destroy German industry.²⁴ While many factors prevented the immediate implementation of ARGUMENT, including disagreement among military leaders regarding Allied air force organization, the main reason for the delay was weather. Near full cloud-cover over Germany made most daytime bombing missions as risky and as imprecise as

¹⁵ Cajus Bekker, *The Luftwaffe War Diaries*, (London: Macdonald & Co., 1966) Frank Ziegler, trans. 344.

¹⁶ David MacIsaac, ed., *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1976) 13.

¹⁷ Forces, 13.

¹⁸ Diaries, 338-339.

¹⁹ Diaries, 341.

²⁰ Forces, 9-11.

²¹ Diaries, 341-343.

²² Logistics, 2-13.

²³ Bombing Survey, 26-29.

²⁴ BBC, WW2 People's War Fact File: Big Week",

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peoplewar/timeline/factfiles/nonflash/a1138367.shtml?section1> (accessed October – November, 2008)

nighttime missions. The deployment of the newest radar system available, H2X, progressed slowly and only a small percentage of the total aircraft had this capability. Even those aircraft equipped with the H2X only had a slight advantage since the system could pierce cloud cover, but not accurately. Finally, on 19 February 1944: "...USSTAF's weather forecasters predicted...the breaking up of the cloud cover over central Europe for an extended period."²⁵ The night of 19 February British forces bombed targets identified by Operation ARGUMENT, eroding the defending GAF night fighter strength.²⁶ General Eaker, in charge of the 15th Air Force, informed General Spaatz that the 15th would not be available. Eaker cited the 15th Air Force's previous commitments to ground support in Italy and less optimistic weather reports over Germany.²⁷ Despite dissent among the rest of the general staff, the pressure to eliminate German airpower had become so urgent²⁸ Spaatz ordered Operation ARGUMENT to commence the next day. Understanding the likelihood of significant allied aircraft loss during the operation, General Spaatz nonetheless ordered the operation, "...even if it meant the loss of 200 bombers in a single mission."²⁹ In the very early hours of February 20, 1944 General Spaatz "...quietly and firmly issued the order to go."³⁰

Allied air force consolidation under General Spaatz was one of the key factors of operation ARGUMENT. It allowed nearly all bombers from the 15th and 8th Air Forces to be used in concert for missions covering the entirety of Germany and striking their relative targets simultaneously. As a result, Luftwaffe fighter squadrons were unable to scramble enough aircraft and pilots to deter the Allied air forces from bombing key targets.

Twelve targets, consisting of plants generally located in the Brunswick-Leipzig area as well as Posen and Tutow and which assembled or manufactured aircraft parts, were identified for the first day's mission.³¹ Six bomber wings flew into northern Germany while ten wings, escorted by the complete fighter force, flew toward targets in central Germany. Because the southern mission registered first on German radar, nearly all Luftwaffe fighters concentrated their forces on them. This left the Allied aircraft striking Posen and Tutow to the north with little interference.³² The turning point of the operation occurred on the first day. Reports of high numbers of successful bomb drop tonnage accompanied by relatively minor Allied losses resulted in Allied confidence that the Luftwaffe would be unable to effectively deter the number of aircraft sent in American daytime and British nighttime bombing raids. Operation ARGUMENT missions during the remainder of the week included Stuttgart (Day 2), Regensburg, Gotha, Bernburg, Oscherslebau, Ascherslebe, Halberstadt, and Schweinfurt (Day3), Schweinfurt, Steyr Tutow, and Rostock (Day 4), and Regensburg-Prufening, Augsburg, Stuttgart and Furth (Day 5).³³ One of the key developments during the week-long campaign was the ability of American escort fighters to destroy their German counterparts. This was the essential difference between ARGUMENT and previous raids. The Germans fighters did, however, meet with some success during ARGUMENT by attacking Allied bombers in the early

²⁵ Davis, Richard G. *Carl A. Spaatz and the Air War in Europe*. (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992) 319

²⁶ *Forces* 33-34.

²⁷ *Spaatz*, 321

²⁸ *Forces*, 31.

²⁹ *Spaatz*, 321

³⁰ *Spaatz*, 321

³¹ *Forces*, 33.

³² *Spaatz*, 322

³³ *Forces* 37-41.

stages of German airspace penetration instead of defending target areas where Allied fighter escort was more complete.³⁴ This was, however, not enough to reverse the shift of German air control to the Allies.

The statistics from the week of bombing are eye-opening: when the operation was over “...the Luftwaffe wrote off more than 33% of its single-engine fighters and lost almost 18% of its fighter pilots...the damage caused a two-month delay in German fighter aircraft production.”³⁵ At the same time, however, the losses Spaatz and his advisors had been willing to concede were realized. Five daytime raids over the course of the week resulted in 226 American bombers and 28 fighters shot down.³⁶ While many of the Operation ARGUMENT targets were hit, most of the damage occurred to buildings housing industrial equipment, but not the equipment itself. Nonetheless Allied confidence had been bolstered.

Part 3

Operation ARGUMENT ended on 25 February 1944 when “...the weather once again closed in...”³⁷ Although ARGUMENT lasted only 5 days, the bombing raids are seen as the turning point in the air war over Europe. The main objective of Operation ARGUMENT had been to destroy and incapacitate aviation industry targets, with the hope that these losses would result in a weak and eventually dead Luftwaffe.³⁸ Because many aircraft production plant buildings were destroyed, Germany further dispersed plant operations around the country to prevent any successful bombing raid from halting overall production. This left a heavy burden on the German transportation system, especially railways, to connect the various plants.³⁹ The long term operational effects of ARGUMENT on German industry were not very severe. After the initial decrease in production in March of 1944, numbers again rose and by the end of the year “...monthly German fighter production climbed from 1,000 to 3,000...”⁴⁰ Although the German aircraft producing industry was only temporarily slowed and forced to relocate its operations, the Allies achieved several other successes. Nazi fighter pilot casualties caused by Allied fighter escorts severely crippled the Luftwaffe air corps.⁴¹ In order to staunch the rapid attrition of pilots, the Nazis adopted a policy of poorly training pilot recruits en masse in hopes that experience gained in combat would do the rest. Pilots still in training were forced to prematurely join the fight. Heavy casualties of poorly trained pilots soon ensured Germans had more planes than pilots to fly them.⁴²

The strategic effects of the operation were much more important to the rest of the war in Europe. The Allies eventually gained their strategic goal of air superiority over Germany, not through aircraft production loss, but through Nazi pilot attrition. The operation proved to the Allied air commanders that their plan to emphasize strategic precision- bombing of German

³⁴ *Forces* 37-38.

³⁵ *Spaatz*, 323

³⁶ BBC, WW2 People's War Fact File: Big Week”,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peoplewar/timeline/factfiles/nonflash/a1138367.shtml?sectionI> (accessed October – November, 2008)

³⁷ *Spaatz*, 323

³⁸ *People's War*.

³⁹ *Spaatz*, 326.

⁴⁰ Alan R. Millet, and Peter Maslowski. 1994. *For the common defense: A Military History of the United States of America*. (New York: The Free Press) 459

⁴¹ *For the common defense*, 459.

⁴² *For the common defense*, 459.

targets, escorted by the long-range P-51 fighter, was effective. Whether or not this was a fact turned out to be less important than the psychological impact it had on the strategists. Believing the reports by U.S. intelligence officers, USSTAF's Assistant Director of Intelligence Colonel Hughes considered "...the result of the week's attack to be the funeral of the German Fighter Force,"⁴³ and shifted the Allied Air Forces' priority of targets. The new target would be the German synthetic oil industry.

The lessons of using a combined bombing attack of multiple targets on German soil accompanied by long-range fighter escorts helped pave the way for achieving air superiority in the War and the eventual land invasion. The Luftwaffe was paralyzed from a shortage of fully trained pilots and fuel for aircraft, leaving "...hundreds of newly assembled fighters grounded from a lack of fuel."⁴⁴ Lack of fuel also prevented Germany from shipping the amount of men and weapons they wanted to the front, especially panzers and 88-mm guns.⁴⁵ On 1 April 1944, when the Strategic Air Forces operational command was passed from Spaatz to General Eisenhower, the Allies were able to shift from strategic bombing to the "...tactical air battle in support of the Normandy invasion."⁴⁶ Luftwaffe operations during OVERLORD were negligible and for the rest of the war the Allies had air superiority over the battlefield.⁴⁷ No doubt this decreased the number of American casualties on the beaches of Normandy. In this sense Operation ARGUMENT was ultimately successful.

⁴³ *Spaatz*, 327.

⁴⁴ *Spaatz*, 326.

⁴⁵ *For the common defense*, 459.

⁴⁶ Federal Depository Library Program Electronic Collection Archive, "The United States Army Air Forces in WWII: Big Week", <http://permanent.access.gpo.gov/lps51153/airforcehistory/usaaf/ww2/atlanticwall/awpg4.htm> (accessed October-November, 2008).

⁴⁷ *For the common defense*, 459.

Bibliography

- Arlington National Cemetery, "Nathan Farragut Twining," <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/ntwining.htm> accessed 10 October 2008.
- Arlington National Cemetery, "James Harold Doolittle," <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/jdoolitt.htm> accessed 10 October 2008.
- Bekker, Cajus. *The Luftwaffe War Diaries*. London: Macdonald & Co., 1966 Frank Ziegler, trans.
- BBC. WW2 People's War Fact File: Big Week", [http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peoplewar/timeline/factfiles/nonflash/a1138367.shtml?section I](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peoplewar/timeline/factfiles/nonflash/a1138367.shtml?section_I) (accessed October –November, 2008)
- Craven, Frank and James Lea Cate, eds. *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, Wesley vol. 3. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.
- Davis, Richard G. *Carl A. Spaatz and the Air War in Europe*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.
- Federal Depository Library Program Electronic Collection Archive, "The United States Army Air Forces in WWII: Big Week", <http://permanent.access.gpo.gov/lps51153/airforcehistory/usaaf/ww2/atlanticwall/awpg4.htm> (accessed October-November, 2008).
- MacIsaac, David ed. *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1976.
- Mayer, George H. "Eisenhower, Dwight David," in *Encyclopedia Americana*, <http://ap.grolier.com/article?assetid=0139680-00> accessed 10 October 2008.
- Millet, ¹ Alan R. and Peter Maslowski.. *For the common defense: A Military History of the United States of America*. New York: The Free Press, 1994.
- The Spaatz Association, Inc. "Carl A. Spaatz," <http://www.spaatz.org/gen/spaatzbio.html> accessed 10 October 2008.
- Sutterfield, Major Jon M. "How Logistics Made Big Week Big," in *Air Force Journal of Logistics*. Washington, D.C.: United States Air Force, U.S. Government Printing Office. Vol. 24 No.2.
- U.S. Air Force, "Lieutenant General William E. Kepner," *U.S. Air Force Military Biographies: Annual 2004* http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_mORBE/is_2004_Annual/ai_n8566955, accessed 10 October 2008, and Forces.
- U.S. Air Force, "The Fifteenth Air Force: A Strategic Punch from the Mediterranean," <http://www.usaaf.net/ww2/africa/africapg5.htm> accessed 10 October 2008.