
The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the February program for the Harold C. Deutsch World War II Roundtable. Tonight's speaker is Williamson Murray a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Defense Analysis in Washington D.C. Professor Murray, along with Army Air Force Veterans, will discuss the role of bombers against Germany.

Of the many technological innovations brought about by the First World War, the use of the airplane would complicate future military planning throughout the inter-war years. Military aviation issues ran the spectrum of airplanes for tactical support to a strategic use where airplanes would make land armies and surface fleet navies obsolete. Whatever military aviation's future would be, the face of warfare was changed forever by the invention of the airplane

The US air power prophets of the 1920's believed that airplanes would decide future conflicts. The Army and Navy each had their own advocates, most notably the Army Brigadier General William "Billy" Mitchell, and the Navy Admirals William Fullam, Bradley Fiske, and William Sims. Along with these leaders, each service had a dedicated force of flying officers who believed in the need to develop air power for the nation's defense, even to the exclusion of other weapon systems. Recognizing the need for military aviation, the Army and Navy Joint Board of Aeronautics stressed the importance for air support to land and sea operations but did not emphasize the notion that air power might win wars.

The air advocates achieved some successes in the debates about air support or air superiority (and the obsolescence of land and sea forces) which raged throughout the inter-war years. Even so, these years did not bring about an independent air force or the unification of all military aviation. The Army did upgrade its 'Air Service' to an 'Air Corps' and added an Assistant Secretary of War (Air). The Navy duplicated the Army's efforts and ordered that only naval aviators could command carriers, and other aviation oriented posts.

When the Second World War in Europe began the Allied air power advocates believed it was time to prove the superiority of air power and that it alone would win the war. Great Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF) and the US Army Air Forces (USAAF) had developed air doctrines on how to conduct aerial bombing which had much in common. Each believed that airplanes were the decisive weapons and strategic bombers attacking population centers and industrial targets would lead to a quick victory and avoid the attrition of trench warfare. In addition, smaller enemy fighter aircraft could not interfere with a bomber offensive and any diversion of resources to other services would seriously impair the bombers' effectiveness.

As bombing operations progressed, differences developed between the bombing doctrines. The British, while initially adhering to their inter-war doctrines of daytime industrial oriented bombing attacks, soon realized that German fighters could take down British bombers. The RAF believed that bombing population centers could demoralize the German civilians and inspire internal dissent. The USAAF maintained its position of daylight

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bombing and focused on Germany's industrial capacities, such as ball-bearing factories. American air commanders believed that if they could take away Germany's ability to wage war, the end would come faster.

Unfortunately, neither idea proved to be true in the initial stages of the war. The German government developed their air defense systems with fighters, radar systems, and anti-aircraft guns that gave the illusion that the German government was interested in protecting its population. Moreover, German war-oriented industries dispersed from central locations and often even went underground to prevent destruction. Even so, by 1943, Germany had not reached the pinnacle of its industrial output.

At the Casablanca conference in January 1943, Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and the Combined Chiefs of Staff included strategic bombing as part of their overall plan for Germany's defeat. While skeptical of the bombing results up to that point, the Allies presented it as a "second front in the air" to a grumbling Josef Stalin. They proposed a Combined Bomber Offensive (CBO) that was to destroy and dislocate Germany's industrial and economic system and demoralize the population, this would make it easier on invasion forces and eventual ground operations. As more bombs were dropped along with the development of long range fighters, and the destruction of German oil and railroad resources, strategic bombing became more of a factor in the war, but the actuality of the war proved that strategic airpower was far different from what the pre-war advocates prophesized.

The Combined Bomber Offensive proved to be one of the most controversial aspects of the war. Historians still debate whether bombing was cost effective and worth the amount of blood that it spilled. However, the CBO was an early effort for the Allies to strike at Nazi Germany

and while the effect of the damage may have been minimal it did aid in Allied morale.

Further Readings:

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Abandoned and Little Known Airfields, <http://www.airfields-freeman.com>

Round Table Schedule 2010

11 March 10	New Guinea Campaign
8 April 10	Invasion of Anzio
22 April 10	Normandy Then & Now
13 May 10	Flying the Hump



Mitchell



Sims

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