

# The Round Tablette

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**Welcome to the March 2009 meeting of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War Two History Roundtable. Our topic for tonight is Close Air Support and our guest speaker is Dr. Thomas A. Hughes of the School for Advanced Aerospace Studies at the Air War College, Maxwell AFB, AL.**

## Close Air Support (CAS)

Our program this month focuses on close air support during the Allied campaigns from northern France into Germany in 1944-45. Close air support is use of aviation assets – fighters, fighter-bombers, bombers – both on the offense and the defense, in support of ground combat forces. Our speaker wrote the biography of General Pete Quesada, commander of IX Tactical Air Command. IX TAC supported Hodges' First Army.

Between the two world wars, most air forces developed doctrine to guide their development and wartime use. Influenced by writers like Giulio Douhet of Italy, most airpower theorists were captivated by notions of strategic bombing, of winning the war without the carnage of the trenches. This concept happily supports an independent air arm, more than an aviation branch (e.g., Naval or Marine air components). In addition, air strategy, like naval and ground strategy, reflects larger policies, strategies, and geo-economic situation of the nation. As a result, national air strategy will vary amongst the combatants.

An island nation, Britain found the notion of “strategic air forces” attractive, for

much the same reason it favored a strong navy. The Royal Air Corps/Force managed to establish independence and even gained control of naval aviation for nearly two decades. Germany, by contrast, had to avoid losing on the ground to give its strategic air force the time to win in the air, resulting in a greater practical emphasis on tactical air power. In addition, Murray Williamson notes that Germany's “aircraft industry lacked the designers, industrial capacity, or experience to build such a ‘strategic’ bombing fleet.” The Luftwaffe provided better CAS initially than the other combatants.

The United States, led by William “Billy” Mitchell, Henry “Hap” Arnold, and others, particularly at the Air Corps Tactical School, favored strategic bombing and an independent air force, but were unable to break the ties that bound them to the army. The United States, in the 1930s, developed heavy (4 engine) bombers that were faster than the frontline fighters then available. This mismatch in capacity reinforced the bomber mentality.

Real development of American close air support doctrine came after the war began, as we saw what did not work in our practice that did work for the British Desert Air Force in North Africa. Quesada and other officers observed and learned, preparing for their own debut in northern France. While some fighter pilots got to Europe without training in CAS, most did have such training and thus had a base on which to build.

Despite all the arguments between strategic and tactical air, the successful practice of close air support or its cousin, interdiction – the destruction of enemy transport and supply capabilities behind his front lines – depends upon first obtaining and keeping air superiority over the battlefield. Once you control the air, you can deploy air assets to deny the enemy

supplies and reinforcements, to hinder the movement of his frontline forces (as we did to the Germans attempting to move toward the beaches), and to support your own ground combat forces. A fearsome arsenal of machine guns, cannon, rockets, and bombs can be employed, singly or in combination, to wreak havoc on the enemy.

As practiced by the IX and XIX TACs (XIX TAC was commanded by BG Otto Weyland, and supported Patton's Third US Army), CAS is a component in *maneuver* warfare. That is, adding air assets in support of the ground forces. In this, it served as a "force multiplier," since the combination of air and ground forces made both stronger and more effective than either would be alone. These forces also illustrated flexibility in use, decentralized control, and use of initiative in their operations.

One example of the ideal practice of close air support and interdiction is found in the effective joint efforts of XIX TAC and Third Army. Weyland and Patton liked and respected each other and worked together well, both personally and professionally. Their staffs cooperated as well. Doctrine called for independence of the air commander, and in this case, Weyland's efforts to support Patton made doctrine work. He co-located his forward headquarters next to Patton's forward headquarters, which helped to ensure coordination and communications started at the top.

Weyland encouraged pilots to talk with ground unit officers to gain understanding of their needs and opportunities. Communications between air and ground units was essential to effective coordination of forces. As a result, XIX TAC squadrons performed advance reconnaissance for armored spearheads, guarded Patton's right flank along the Loire river – hence the 1303<sup>rd</sup> Engineer General Service Regiment could be the right-most unit in Third Army during the dash across France, supported ground units with great effectiveness,

and still successfully performed interdiction, air defense and air superiority missions.

### More Reading on Tonight's Topic:

Thomas A. Hughes, *Over Lord: General Pete Quesada and the Triumph of Tactical Air Power in World War II* (Free Press, 1995).

Al Zdon and Warren Mack, *One Step Forward: The Life of Ken Dahlberg* (I Was There Press, 2008).

Robert F. Dorr and Thomas D. Jones, *Hell Hawks!: The Untold Story of the American Fliers Who Savaged Hitler's Wehrmacht*, (Zenith Press, 2008).

Williamson Murray, *Strategy for Defeat; the Luftwaffe, 1933-1945* (Air University Press, 1983).

David N. Spires, *Patton's Air Force: Forging a Legendary Air-Ground Team* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002).

Robert V. Brulle, *Angels Zero: P-47 Close Air Support in Europe* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000).

Bradford J. Shwedo, *XIX Tactical Air Command and ULTRA: Patton's Force Enhancers in 1944 Campaign in France*, CADRE Papers No. 10, (Air University Press, 2001)

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