Welcome to the May session of the
Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II
History Round Table. Tonight’s speaker is Jay Stout, author of The Men Who Killed the Luftwaffe, will show how the introduction of Air Power into the European Theater of Operations by the Army Air Corps and Eighth Air Force led to victory in WWII.

One of the many technological innovations first employed during World War I, the airplane, complicated military planning throughout the inter-war years. Military aviation issues ran the spectrum from tactical support to strategic bombing — some thought (hoped) airplanes would make land armies and surface fleet navies obsolete. Airpower theorists believed that military aviation would dramatically change warfare.

US air power prophets of the 1920s, influenced by an Italian officer, Giulio Douhet, who argued that air power would prevent the butchery of the Great War’s Western Front, proclaimed that the airplane would decide future conflicts. The Army and Navy each had their own advocates, most notably Brigadier General William “Billy” Mitchell, and Admirals William Fullam, Bradley Fiske, and William Sims. 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 tactical importance of air support for land and sea operations but didn’t champion the notion that air power might win wars.

Air advocates scored some successes, though not an independent air force or the unification of all military aviation. The Army upgraded its ‘Air Service’ to an ‘Air Corps’ and added an Assistant Secretary of War (Air). The Navy did likewise 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 the time to prove the superiority of air power – 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 strategic 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 in practice separated the two allies. The British soon realized that German fighters put up a far stronger defense in daytime than expected. Furthermore, bombing accuracy proved pathetically poor. The RAF came to believe that “area bombing” of population centers demoralized the German civilians and inspired internal dissent. The USAAF maintained its position of daylight precision bombing (due to the Norden bombsight) and its strategic focus on Germany’s industrial capacities, such as ball-bearing factories. American air commanders believed they could destroy Germany’s ability to wage war.

In January 1942, Brig. Gen. Ira C. Eaker stood up VIII Bomber Command (In Dec. 42, 8th AF). He was expected to prove the theory and effectiveness of a daylight precision bombing campaign using the Norden bombsight despite the experiences of the Royal Air Force.

The belief that strategic bombing could destroy Germany’s ability to wage war turned out to be a chimera. The German government developed their air defense systems with fighters, radar systems, and anti-aircraft guns which demonstrated both the German government’s ability to protect its population, and that bomber formations were terribly vulnerable to fighter attack. Moreover, bombing of craft-oriented (hand-made) German factories forced the dispersal of plants, often underground, and the shift to more mass production, though German airmen, sailors, and tankers complained of the poorer finish and quality. As the Allies destroyed Germany’s industry, war production increased.
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. The Western Allies proposed a Combined Bomber Offensive (CBO) hoping to destroy and dis locate Germany’s industrial and economic system and demoralize the population, this would make it easier on invasion forces and eventual ground operations.

Despite Eaker’s replacement in December 1943 by Lt. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle, bomber and aircrew losses remained horribly high until long-range fighters, like the P-51, became available and gave valuable protection for the bomber fleets, producing far more accurate strikes that destroyed German resources, especially oil, and transport nets, notably railroads. Albert Speer, German armaments minister, considered the degradation of the German oil industry by bombing the greatest threat to the Reich’s economic war fighting capacity.

The Nazi Blitz failed to force Britain’s surrender in 1940 and similarly, the German civilian morale remained unbroken by the bombing. Even so, Goebbels continued to be very sensitive to civilian reactions to the increasingly intense air strikes on German cities, especially amongst Berliners. Clearly, air power advocates overstated the importance of strategic bombing.

Further Readings:

Announcements:
Vietnam War Roundtable – September 2021 –