

Creation of the 8th by Jaime Hanna

Proponents of an expanded role for the Army Air Corps found an ally in President Franklin D. Roosevelt. After the Munich Pact in September 1938 wherein England and France donated Czechoslovakia to appease Hitler, Roosevelt saw the looming war in Europe and began to prepare accordingly. Obviously, the best case scenario for the United States was for England and her allies to defeat Nazi Germany without the U.S. having to get directly involved. With that in mind, Roosevelt knew that helping arm the allied countries was paramount. Ever the politician, Roosevelt could not come out and directly advocate for intervention in Europe when the majority of his countrymen favored isolationism, but he got around these obstacles by clever maneuvering. When Harry H. Woodring, secretary of war and stringent isolationist, objected to the sale of American made arms and planes, Roosevelt put the Treasury Department (and by extension close friend Henry Morgenthau) in charge of the transactions, claiming it was a monetary concern more so than a military concern. (*Coffey, p. 179-182*)

Roosevelt appointed Hap Arnold as the Chief of the Army Air Corps with the job of slowly fortifying the American Air Forces should the U.S. be pulled in the war, an objective which proved difficult. While Roosevelt privately supported a growing Air Force, publicly he could only do so much. Arnold found himself in a constant battle with Morgenthau and other government interventionists over who should get the new planes, specifically the two new heavy bombers that were being manufactured: the B-17 by Boeing and the B-24 produced by Consolidated. Arnold and the Air Corps tried to secure contracts for planes to be retained in the U.S., while Morgenthau lobbied for the bulk of the planes to be sent to Europe. After Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939, Arnold was more alarmed at the inadequacies he saw in the American Air Forces and attempted in earnest to bolster the numbers of planes it had. When he complained about European countries receiving preference from manufacturers in getting the majority of the finished airplanes, he was swiftly silenced by Roosevelt, who did not want to risk the political fallout should the public perceive he was preparing to enter the war.

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The bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, ended the debate over which country should receive the lion's share of the planes. That Christmas, President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill met at the White House to map out a war strategy. They determined that Nazi Germany was the more imminent threat as their U-boats continued to sink and harass merchant ships in the Atlantic. England, which imported 50% of its food and 100% of its oil, faced the very real possibility of being starved to death. The Allies were also concerned over the possibility of Soviet collapse and the threat of German secret technologies. With the decision to focus on the war in Europe first, Roosevelt agreed to help the Royal Air Force with their bombing campaign against Germany.

On January 28, 1942 the charter for the Eighth Air Force was created in a former National Guard Armory in Savannah, Georgia. Its main objective was two-fold: first, to cripple Hitler's war making capabilities by destroying factories and taking out transportation lines; and second, to clear the skies of the Luftwaffe so that an allied landing on continental Europe would be possible. Arnold appointed Major General Carl Spaatz to command the new Eighth Air Force. Brigadier General Frank Hunter was put in charge of Fighter Command and Brigadier General Ira Eaker was made head of the bombardment force. Although the majority of Eaker's experience was with fighter planes, Arnold put him in charge of bombardment to put "the fighter spirit in bombardment aviation." Eaker and the 6 men he selected to help him set up command in England set out in February 1942. They had the daunting task of establishing the Eighth Air Force Headquarters in East Anglia, preparing the airfields, drawing up training schedules for incoming American troops and studying the RAF Bomber Command to make recommendations. Spaatz arrived in May 1942 with 39 officers and 348 enlisted men to help Eaker and by the end of the month, they had an additional eleven thousand troops.

In addition to working out the logistics of recruiting, building and then transferring an entire Air Force, the American commanders had to combat the British idea that daylight strategic bombing (DSB) was a suicide

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mission. The British had attempted this already and felt that the losses were unsustainable and went back to the safer (but far less accurate) nighttime carpet bombing. In addition, the British were skeptical about the performance of the B-17 after testing out the early models, of which they were not impressed. When implored by Air Vice Marshal Arthur T. Harris to join the RAF in night bombing, Eaker famously replied, "...We'll bomb them by day. You bomb them by night. We'll hit them right around the clock."
(Parton, p. 130)

With unprecedented cooperation, the British and Americans worked together to set up the massive infrastructure needed to support this enormous operation. The first planes arrived in July, 1942 and the first mission to Rouen, France was August 17, 1942. Twelve planes were sent to Rouen where marshaling yards were successfully bombed without losing any planes or men. This "milk run" turned out to be the exception rather than the rule of future missions. On any given mission, only one out of every three airmen could expect to make it back to England safely. Until the introduction of the P-51 Mustang in the spring of 1944, the Eighth would continually take staggering losses. The idea of a fighter that could escort bombers the entire distance to the target and back was initially considered impossible but after devastating losses at Schweinfurt in October 1943, the concept was re-examined. Arnold removed Eaker as commander of the Eighth and made Lt. General James H. Doolittle the new commander. Doolittle made the development of long-range fighter escorts a priority and by early spring 1944, modifications made to the P-51 made the impossible, possible. Combined with his strategy that escorts fly ahead of the bombers to engage the Luftwaffe head on, suddenly losses of men and planes began to drop.

In less than two and a half years, the Eighth Air Force had completed one of their two objectives. On June 6, 1944 the skies over Normandy were clear of the Luftwaffe and the land invasion of Hitler's "Fortress Europe" commenced, turning

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the tide for the Allies. In less than a year, the war in Europe would be over. Of course, the Eighth - an all volunteer unit - paid the highest price for this victory. Of its 350,000 men who served in Europe during World War II, 28,000 were taken prisoner of war and another 26,000 were killed, making their casualty rate higher than that of any other branch of the service. They attempted something that had never been done in history and through trial and error and incredible leadership, created the most powerful Air Force in history.