

**Carl A.**  
**SPAATZ**  

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**and the Air War in Europe**

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**General Carl A. Spaatz, 1945.**

# **Carl A. SPAATZ**

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## **and the Air War in Europe**

**Richard G. Davis**



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# Foreword

*Carl A. Spaatz and the Air War in Europe* offers the first detailed review of Spaatz as a commander. It examines how the highest ranking U.S. airman in the European Theater of Operations of World War II viewed the war, worked with the British, and wielded the formidable air power at his disposal. It identifies specifically those aspects of his leadership that proved indispensable to the Allied victory over Nazi Germany.

As Chief of the Air Corps Plans Section and, beginning in 1941, as first Chief of the Air Staff, Spaatz helped prepare the United States for war by overseeing an unprecedented buildup of military air capability. As Commander of the Eighth Air Force, he expanded and maintained a network of bases from which his bombers could strike at Germany from England. As General Eisenhower's adviser and Commander of the Northwest African Air Forces, he reorganized and vastly improved dispersed and difficult-to-supply Allied air activities. After assuming command of all U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe, he controlled the American contribution to the Combined Bomber Offensive.

Spaatz's forces destroyed the Luftwaffe, first by employing new long-range fighters in vigorous counter-air actions and then, when the Luftwaffe assiduously avoided further engagements, by forcing it to fight to defend the petroleum industry that fueled it. Only after a protracted debate concerning which targets—oil or transportation—were to receive top priority did he win the right from skeptical Allied principals to mount strategic bombing missions against German oil production facilities. With the Luftwaffe effectively paralyzed, Spaatz moved against bridges, ports, railyards, and roads and, finally, crushed the Nazi war economy.

The Anglo-American partnership, although triumphant in the end, was not easy. Its lines of authority were frequently and hotly debated. Through portraits of major Allied civilian and military personalities, this study describes several contentious interactions around which Spaatz maneuvered adroitly to achieve his broad military objectives.

Author Richard Davis contrasts American and British grand strategy, battle tactics, and operations, laying bare the political considerations that necessarily influenced Allied planning. He demonstrates how clashes among only a few individuals can profoundly affect command decisions and the successful prosecution of coalition warfare. Lessons contained in his study have implications even now in the post-Desert Storm era. That the Air Force today is able to project global strength is due in large measure to the foresight and tenacity of Carl Spaatz, who freed air power to become the dominant force of modern warfare.

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# Introduction

This study is an expansion of a doctoral dissertation I began in 1982. Initially I sought to tell the story of the air war in Europe from a new perspective—that of the senior U.S. Army Air Forces (AAF) officer in the theater, General Carl A. Spaatz. Little did I realize the magnitude of the task. I discovered a man who had stood close to the central events of the conflict in Europe. Without Spaatz and his insistence on bombing the German oil industry, the war in Europe might have lasted several more months. Spaatz commanded more men than Patton or Rommel ever led. By the end of May 1945 his forces could deliver more destructive power than any force before the advent of nuclear weapons. Thus, an understanding of the part Spaatz played in the victory of the Allied coalition is necessary to any serious study of World War II.

In the course of investigating Spaatz's activities during the war, I soon realized that many of the conventional interpretations of the role of the U.S. Army Air Forces in Europe sprang from the immediate post-World War II era when the AAF was in the last rounds of its fight to gain independence from the U.S. Army. As a consequence, early U.S. air historians tended to downplay the shortcomings of air power and to emphasize the advantages of centralized command of air power by airmen operating autonomously. In this work I have attempted to present a more balanced view of the effectiveness of air power.

By its very nature this study of the military life of Carl A. Spaatz is virtually a history of U.S. military aviation from its beginnings to the end of World War II in Europe. To place Spaatz in the context of his times, I found it necessary to examine the development of U.S. military aviation thought and technology. From his tour as Commandant of the Issoudun Pursuit Training Center in France in 1917, where he first displayed his skills as an administrator and trainer of men, through his service as special observer during the Battle of Britain in the summer of 1940, Spaatz's career reflected the continual changes in air power.

Immediately after World War I, Spaatz commanded the sole pursuit group stationed in the continental United States and led the flight of its air elements from Texas to Michigan without the loss of a man or machine (no mean feat in 1922). Once in Michigan, he established his group at Selfridge Field, which had been abandoned two years earlier. Leaving Selfridge in 1924, he attended the Air Corps Tactical School at Langley Field near Norfolk, Virginia.

At that time and place the school was far removed from the future period of intellectual and doctrinal ferment in which it produced the American theory of daylight precision bombing. Next, Spaatz served in Washington, D.C., in the Air Service's Training and Operations Section. There he testified as a defense witness in the controversial court-martial of Brig. Gen. William "Billy" Mitchell.

## INTRODUCTION

During the late 1920s and 1930s Spaatz switched from commanding fighters to commanding bombers—a career move that mirrored the Air Corps' change in emphasis from pursuit to bombardment aviation. At the same time, he absorbed the new theories that preached the ability of the heavily armed bomber, flying a tight defensive formation, to penetrate successfully deep into enemy territory to destroy vital economic targets and to return, all the while unescorted by friendly fighter aircraft. Even subsequent firsthand experience of the British and German failure to bomb effectively in daylight failed to persuade him to modify his belief in unescorted bombing.

Before U.S. entry into World War II, Spaatz, as Chief of the Air Corps Plans Section and, upon the formation of the AAF in June 1941, as first Chief of the Air Staff, helped to plan and supervise the vast expansion of U.S. military air power. On July 1, 1939, the Air Corps had a force of 1,239 combat aircraft, 570 training planes, 20,191 enlisted men, 633 aviation cadets, and 2,502 officers. Many of the aircraft were obsolescent; there were no advanced training aircraft; and all but 45 of the officers were rated pilots. Thirty-two months later, on March 1, 1942, the AAF had 2,393 combat aircraft (2,182 rated as modern), 10,087 trainers (2,541 advanced), 312,405 enlisted men, 32,896 cadets, and 27,446 officers (13,631 nonpilots).<sup>1</sup> These figures represented an increase of more than 1,000 percent in every category except combat aircraft, which increased only 200 percent.

With the onset of war, Spaatz took command of the Eighth Air Force and helped prepare a base capable of sustaining the thousands of planes scheduled to operate against Germany from Britain. After Spaatz had launched only a handful of heavy-bomber missions against nearby French targets, however, Lt. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower summoned Spaatz to the North African Theater to advise him and, eventually, to command all Allied air power there.

In North Africa the organizational chaos of his geographically scattered command tested his logistical and organizational abilities to the utmost, but by the finish of the Allies' campaign against the Axis forces in Tunisia, Spaatz had produced a well-run, efficient force. Also in North Africa, he played a significant role in solving the dispute between the Army ground and air elements about the effectiveness of the AAF's handling of close air support.

The fall of Tunisia led to the Allied invasion of Sicily and Italy and a period of frustration for Spaatz. After overseeing the reduction of the Island of Pantelleria by air power, Spaatz saw his influence on operations decline as Eisenhower increasingly relied on British Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder. In the summer and autumn of 1943, Spaatz concentrated on perfecting the organization of the AAF in the Mediterranean and on obtaining and establishing a new strategic American air force to operate against Germany from its unprotected southern flank.

At the end of 1943, Spaatz left Italy for London where he assumed command of the two American strategic air forces operating against the Germans.



As the strategic air commander, he made his two most decisive contributions to Allied victory. With the help of an influx of long-range fighter-escort aircraft, he launched, in the first five months of 1944, an intensive counter-air campaign that emasculated the Luftwaffe fighter force. By the time of the invasion of Normandy, the German air force no longer had the strength to interfere with the invasion or to defend German industry from each large American bomber mission.

Shortly before the invasion, Spaatz, after a long policy struggle within the Allied coalition, began a strategic bombing campaign against the German oil industry. This campaign damaged vital cogs of the Nazi war machine by grounding a large portion of the Luftwaffe starving it of aviation fuel, and by impairing the mobility of the *Wehrmacht*, leaving it almost helpless to counter the maneuvers of its enemies.

Under Spaatz's leadership, in the autumn and winter of 1944–1945, the U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe (USSTAF) helped to bring the German war economy to a halt by adding the transportation network to its target priorities. Spaatz's forces also participated in the most controversial bombing raid of the European war when they joined with British Bomber Command to level the center of Dresden on February 14, 1945. An exemplar of AAF bombing policy and operations, this raid carried a high proportion of incendiary bombs, was directed at a railroad marshaling yard, and was executed in nonvisual bombing conditions. It was not carried out to induce terror but was intended to give direct assistance to the Soviets' winter offensive by destroying a transportation center in eastern Germany. In contrast, the February 3, 1945, mission against Berlin was specifically ordered by Spaatz to shake the morale of the German High Command and government.

In the middle of April 1945, Spaatz ended the strategic bombing campaign. Thereafter, the bombers devoted their efforts to aiding the ground forces and flying supplies to alleviate famine in Holland. Spaatz attended the German surrenders to the Allies at Reims and Berlin on May 7 and May 9, 1945.

This work is neither a full-scale biography of Carl A. Spaatz nor a comprehensive history of the USAAF in action against the European Axis powers from 1942 to 1945. Instead it studies Spaatz as a military leader by examining his thoughts and actions within the context of his times. By hewing to Spaatz's perspective I could not follow the entire course of the American strategic bomber offensive in Europe. Those readers looking for a description of the Eighth Air Force under Ira Eaker's leadership or of Spaatz's valuable contributions in the postwar era must look elsewhere. But a year-long trip to North Africa and the Mediterranean enabled me to take a close look at the birth pangs of modern American tactical air power, to explore the creation of the under-appreciated Fifteenth Air Force, and to thoroughly study the last eighteen months of the American air effort in Europe once Spaatz had returned to the strategic cockpit in London.



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