



B-26s returning to base.

Courtesy U.S. Air Force History Office

Kasserine Pass

and the Proper Application of Airpower

By SHAWN P. RIFE

In November 1942 the Allies began Operation Torch, a massive invasion of French Morocco and Algeria with over 107,000 troops—three-fourths American—designed to throw Axis forces out of North Africa. Many factors including faulty decisions, confused command relationships, supply problems, and inexperienced troops thwarted hopes for a rapid victory. Forces under Field Marshal Erwin Rommel concentrated in Tunisia and were reinforced. Allied difficulties culminated in near disaster at Kasserine Pass in February 1943. In the process, the U.S. Army learned a major lesson on the appropriate relationship between air and ground forces—a lesson

that it later put to good use. Kasserine Pass is the only important battle fought by the Armed Forces—either in World War II or since that time—without enjoying air superiority.

During the winter of 1942–43, the air organization in North Africa paralleled the division of ground forces into American, British, and French contingents. Major General Carl Spaatz, nominal commander of Allied Air Force, ordered Eastern Air Command under Air Marshal William Welsh to support British 1st Army while Twelfth Air Force under Brigadier General Jimmy Doolittle, hero of the April 1942 raid on Tokyo, was directed to support all U.S. land forces. In particular, Twelfth Air Force's XII Air Support Command (ASC) was charged with cooperating with the American land forces, organized and consolidated under II Corps.

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U.S. Air Force

Loading fighter bombers, Tripolitania.

XII ASC possessed a large proportion of available American fighters and light and medium bombers but suffered a number of operational handicaps. The rainy season turned many airfields to mud. Logistics shortfalls and inexperience among ground crew reduced sortie rates. Lack of radar coverage at the front forced XII ASC to rely upon fighter sweeps for counterair operations, which the Germans usually managed to avoid.

Aerial Umbrellas

One of the most crippling obstacles for XII ASC was poor air support doctrine as embodied in Field Manual 31-35 of April 9, 1942, *Aviation in Support of Ground Forces*. Although the Army Air Force had spearheaded development of this manual, intending that it address only the conduct of close air support, in trying to reconcile different viewpoints it contained inconsistencies that opened the door in doctrinal terms to the subordination of the air force to ground force needs.

Contrary to popular belief FM 31-35 did not prescribe that air units should be either assigned or attached to ground units. This omission disappointed ground force officers who, ignoring the disastrous French experience in 1940 when the *Armée de l’Air* was fragmented into individual units under different ground commanders, objected to the centralized control of air assets. However, the manual did state that “the most important target at a particular time will usually be that target which constitutes the most serious threat to the operations of

the supported ground force. The final decision as to priority of targets rests with the commander of the supported unit.”¹ This excerpt would be the centerpiece of the doctrinal disagreement between air and ground officers. Despite any agreement on what FM 31-35 actually meant for command and control of airpower, General Dwight Eisenhower, who exercised nominal control over the entire Allied force, wrote in January that “[we] have a published doctrine that has not been proved faulty.”² A headquarters memo of October 1942, stating that aircraft should not be “frittered away” on unimportant targets but instead “reserved for concentration in overwhelming attack upon important objectives,” failed to resolve the problem.³

The effects of this doctrinal dispute were exacerbated by the lack of an effective air-ground support team. Inexperience and inadequate training on all levels, the fluid situation on the ground, and frequent command changes all contributed to the problem. The Americans neglected to glean any meaningful lessons from the British experience in the Western Desert. Neither of the architects of the successful British air operations present—Air Vice Marshal Arthur Coningham nor Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder—were consulted during the planning for Operation Torch. The confusion engendered by a doctrine that blurred lines of authority and encouraged conflict in setting priorities resulted in such incidents as aircraft sitting idle during a fierce German attack on French lines in late January. On one occasion, Major General Lloyd Fredendall, commander of the U.S. II Corps, ordered XII ASC to refuse an urgent French request for air reconnaissance support on the grounds that II Corps had no responsibilities in the affected area.

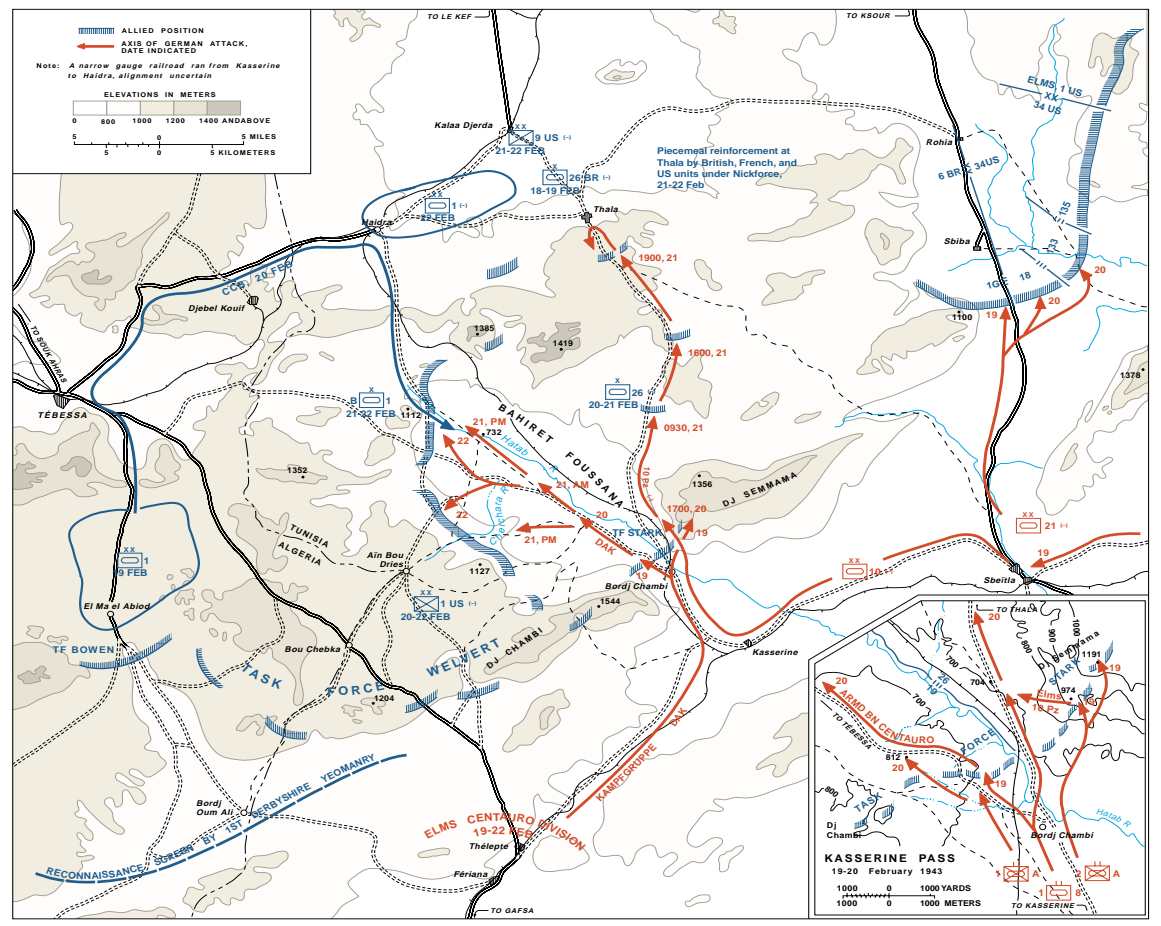
On January 31, German *Stukas* struck an American truck convoy near Maknasse, Tunisia, and inflicted numerous casualties. Although the troops were inexperienced and had little anti-aircraft support, this incident convinced ground commanders of the need for aerial “umbrellas.” Lieutenant General Kenneth Anderson,

Every soldier generally thinks only as far as the radius of action of his branch of the service and only as quickly as he can move with his weapons.

—General Karl Koller

commander of British 1st Army (who was unfamiliar with air-ground experiences in British 8th Army in the Western Desert), wanted available aircraft employed as flying artillery and, according to his chief of staff, was uninterested “in the bombing of enemy airdromes.” Similarly, Fredendall “wanted his men to see some bombs dropped on the position immediately in front of them and, if possible,

Battles at Kasserine Pass and Sbiba Gap (February 19–22, 1943)



Source: George F. Howe, *The Mediterranean Theater of Operations, Northwest Africa: Seizing the Initiative in the West* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1957), map 9.

some [enemy] dive bombers brought down in sight of his troops." However, U.S. medium bomber and P-40 groups had suffered heavy losses to German fighters and ground fire in air support missions, and the replacement rate for both pilots and aircraft could not keep pace. Accordingly, an exasperated General Spaatz argued that the air forces should be allowed to hit airfields, tank parks, and unarmored convoys—targets with greater long-term consequence. Spaatz told Fredendall that "if he maintained a constant 'umbrella' over one small section of the front with only shallow penetrations by bombers and fighters . . . his available force would be dissipated without any lasting effect."⁴ Fredendall—who had built an elaborate bomb-proof headquarters far from the front—conceded that infantry, armor, and artillery were not the "soft points" of the Army, but he refused to agree to any ground support arrangement proposed by airmen.

The results of this impasse should have been predictable. With no offensive radar coverage, XII ASC was overburdened trying to both provide umbrellas and escort attack aircraft attempting to conduct missions behind enemy lines. On February 2, friendly forces suffered serious losses in the effort to protect a wide front. A cover mission consisting of six P-40s and four P-39s encountered twenty to thirty *Stukas* and eight to ten Bf 109s. Five P-40s were lost while only one *Stuka* was shot down. The Germans, reinforced with aircraft transferred in the retreat from Libya, asserted air superiority over Tunisia—not by greater numbers but because of exceptional aircraft (the Americans still could not match a well-handled Bf 109) and U.S. Army support doctrine that permitted the *Luftwaffe* to operate virtually with impunity.

Back to the Dorsal

Taking advantage of the situation, Rommel launched an offensive designed to instill in the

P-40 after German night raid, Algeria.



U.S. Air Force



Ju 52 escorted by Ju 87.

Courtesy U.S. Air Force History Office

Americans “an inferiority complex of no mean order.” The Allied front in Tunisia had gathered along a mountain range known as the Eastern Dorsal, which ran north to south parallel to the eastern shore of Tunisia.

II Corps was spread out in defense of passes on the southern end of the range. Rommel’s plan was to break through the American-defended passes, drive across the wide plain to the west, force through the passes of another mountain range known as the Western Dorsal, and then overrun Allied airfields and supply depots northward to the Algerian coast.

Between February 14 and 16, 1943, the Germans destroyed two battalions each of American armor, artillery, and infantry and forced II Corps off the Eastern Dorsal. XII ASC, compelled to hastily evacuate forward airfields and hampered by bad weather, was unable to intervene effectively and II Corps, harassed by the *Luftwaffe*, retreated in disorder to the Western Dorsal. Here attention turned to Kasserine Pass, a corridor to the vital Algerian crossroads town of Tebessa. Fortunately for the Allies, the Germans were plagued by command and control problems of their own, which delayed the assault on the pass by two days. The exhausted Americans used the time to regroup and receive reinforcements.

Air power is indivisible. If you split it up into compartments, you merely pull it to pieces and destroy its greatest asset—its flexibility.

—Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery

In the midst of the Kasserine crisis, the Allies completed a number of command changes previously proposed at the January 1943 Casablanca conference. The most important was the establishment (under Sir Coningham) of the Northwest African Tactical Air Force (NATAF), a sub-element of the new Northwest African Air Force under the command of Spaatz (who would thenceforth participate in Allied conferences as an equal to his ground and naval counterparts). Consistent with British doctrine, one of Coningham’s first actions was suspension of air umbrella missions unless specifically authorized by NATAF. He pointed out that there were never enough aircraft to meet demand

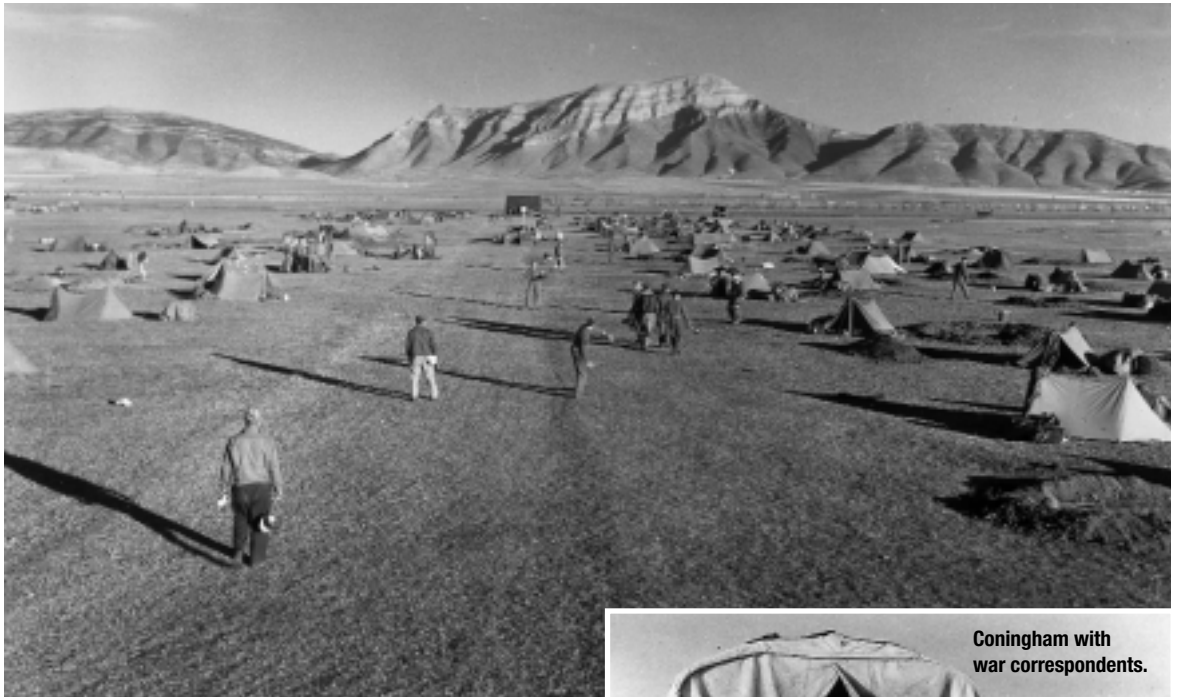
and directed a halt to tank-busting. Instead, all future missions would center on airfields, infantry concentrations, and soft-skinned vehicles. Guidance was issued that:

[Maximum air support for land operations] *can only be achieved by fighting for and obtaining a high measure of air*

*supremacy in the theater of operations. As a result of success in this air fighting, our land forces will be enabled to operate virtually unhindered by enemy air attack and our air forces will be given increased freedom to assist in the actual battle area and in attacks against objectives in the rear. . . . The enemy must be attacked wherever he can be found, and destroyed. . . . the inculcation of the offensive spirit is of paramount importance.*⁵

Eisenhower eventually embraced the new philosophy, in part because he lost confidence in Fredendall (replaced by George Patton on March 6). Nevertheless, it would take time for these new arrangements to affect the battlefield. On February 20, the Germans broke through

**301st Bomb Group
Headquarters, Algeria.**



U.S. Air Force



**Coningham with
war correspondents.**

Courtesy U.S. Air Force History Office

Kasserine Pass after two days of fighting, again forcing the Americans back in disorder. Seemingly on the verge of victory, Rommel suddenly became cautious. Impressed by the abundance of American equipment and supplies and the speed with which reinforcements had been rushed into the Kasserine area, he withdrew his forces to the Eastern Dorsal to prepare for an expected Allied counteroffensive. Freed from constraints on the ground, British and U.S. aircraft punished the retreating enemy. Although the effect of these missions was not apparent to the Allied commanders at the time, Rommel would later write that his forces “were subjected to hammer-blow air attacks by the U.S. air force in the Feriana-Kasserine area, of weight and concentration hardly surpassed by those we had suffered at Alamein.”⁶ Several days later, Rommel was relieved of command (officially to take “sick leave”) after unsuccessfully arguing with Hitler that North Africa should be abandoned.

The Americans did not adopt every British idea on airpower. There was disagreement as to whether XII ASC should follow the Royal Air Force practice of directing all air support requests to the headquarters level. Americans preferred using air support parties where Army Air Force liaison teams traveled with the forward ground elements and communicated directly with aircraft assigned to close air support. (In practice, as Allied aircraft grew in number, both methods proved effective.)

Nor did disagreements cease between ground and air commanders. Patton, who at first had endorsed the schemes implemented by Coningham, angrily criticized his colleague when a German air attack killed one of his aides. Eisenhower was forced to intervene, suggesting that Patton drop the matter for “the great purpose of complete Allied teamwork.” Nevertheless, complaints from ground commanders over air support continued for much of the remainder of the campaign. Spaatz concluded that they originated from the inability to obtain close air support when and where needed. His visits to the forward headquarters indicated that lack of communication rather than of aircraft was the difficulty. Some problems

Ju 87B-1 *Stukas*.

Courtesy U.S. Air Force History Office

were the result of conflicting requests between British 1st Army and U.S. II Corps. Spaatz took action, including sacking the air liaison officer at II Corps. A return visit by Spaatz to the forward lines on May 4 revealed greater satisfaction with the air support.⁷

The Palm Sunday Massacre

Meanwhile, the rest of Twelfth Air Force, consisting mainly of heavy and medium bombers and escorts, had not been idle in North Africa. During the height of the Kasserine crisis, Spaatz had placed most of the bombers in XII Bomber Command at Coningham's disposal. After February 24, Twelfth Air Force resumed its campaign against German supply in North Africa in force. Air attacks on shipping and harbors, along with minelaying operations, had begun in earnest in mid-January. By the end of February Allied aircraft were forcing the *Luftwaffe* to withdraw its fighters to protect ports and convoy routes. This relinquishment of air superiority had a cascading effect: *Stuka* losses went up even as the deteriorating ground situation increased German demands for close air support. To meet these needs, enemy bombers were forced to give up attacks on enemy ports, thus easing the Allied supply situation but not achieving any significant results at the front.⁸

The sinking of Axis shipping continued, forcing the Germans to rely increasingly on aerial resupply. In the face of the growing quantitative superiority of Allied fighters, the result was disaster. On April 18, for example, four squadrons of P-40s intercepted a formation of more than a hundred Ju 52 transports escorted by mixed Axis fighters. Some 78 Axis aircraft were shot down with the loss of only seven American planes. It would be known as the "Palm Sunday Massacre."⁹

In April and early May, the *Luftwaffe* lost 177 Ju 52s supplying North Africa. Combined with the catastrophic losses at Stalingrad, the German air transport fleet was effectively destroyed. In Tunisia the Germans possessed plenty of men and guns but were soon desperately short of food, ammunition, and fuel. On April 22, the *Luftwaffe* began to withdraw from its North African bases and the Allied air forces were able to shift from attacks on airfields to ground support missions. German defenses crumbled and the campaign in North Africa ended on May 13 with the surrender of 250,000 Axis soldiers.

Lessons

There were many reasons for the American debacle at Kasserine Pass in February 1943, but perhaps the most significant in terms of lessons for the future was poor handling—largely as a result of inferior doctrine—of the combat air assets



Courtesy U.S. Air Force History Office

Spaatz and Patton meeting in Algiers.

available to the Allies prior to the battle. Most of the traditional principles of war were ignored. The treatment in FM 31-35 of airpower as flying artillery to be parceled out in support of ground formations at the point of attack squandered aircraft on costly and frequently inconsequential missions, ensured that other aircraft were underutilized in the midst of disagreements over priorities, and left many more lucrative targets untouched. The emphasis on defensive air umbrellas meant that superior German fighters could concentrate at important points and return to the sanctuary of their airfields. The enemy was able to take the initiative both in the air and on the ground until stopped by the weight of numbers, but many Allied casualties were incurred.

In July 1943, in response to the problems with FM 31-35, the Army introduced FM 100-20. The new manual asserted: "Land power and air power are co-equal and interdependent forces. . . . Control of available air power must be centralized and command must be exercised through the air force commander if this inherent flexibility and ability to deliver a decisive blow are to be fully exploited."¹⁰ This doctrine would be proven in Western Europe in 1944–45.

The tenets of FM 100-20 remain integral to current Air Force doctrine. AFDD 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, makes "centralized control and decentralized execution" a fundamental of airpower:

Air and space power must be controlled by an airman who maintains a broad strategic and/or theater perspective in prioritizing the use of limited air and space assets to attain the objectives of all U.S. forces in any contingency across the range of operations. . . . The lesson is clear: attempts to fragment the control and planning of air and space power will ultimately cost blood and treasure by diverting effort and impact. Centralized control allows commanders to focus on those priorities that lead to victory.

As our forces shrink because of budget reductions, the need for a single commander who can efficiently prioritize the use of precious air assets in pursuit of campaign objectives should be readily apparent. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Office for Air Force History, *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, volume 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 137.

² Richard G. Davis, *Carl A. Spaatz and the Air War in Europe* (Washington: Center for Air Force History, 1993), p. 174.

³ Office for Air Force History, *Army Air Forces*, p. 137.

⁴ David Syrett, "Northwest Africa, 1942–43," *Case Studies in the Achievement of Air Superiority*, edited by Benjamin Franklin Cooling (Washington: Center for Air Force History, 1994), p. 241.

⁵ Office for Air Force History, *Army Air Forces*, p. 168.

⁶ Davis, *Air War in Europe*, p. 183.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 206–09.

⁸ Williamson Murray, *Strategy for Defeat: the Luftwaffe 1933–1945* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air University Press, 1983), p. 162.

⁹ Walter J. Boyne, *Clash of Wings* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 186.

¹⁰ Office for Air Force History, *Army Air Forces*, p. 206.