

George Marshall, facing imminent war, acted decisively to free airpower from the General Staff's obstruction and delaying tactics.

The First Air Staff

By Herman S. Wolk

SIXTY years ago this month, the United States Army created the Army Air Forces. With that critical June 1941 action came the establishment of the first American Air Staff. That staff reported directly to a new AAF Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Henry H. Arnold. All were momentous steps in development of airpower.

Creation of the Air Staff stemmed from apprehension about general

Principals in establishing the Air Staff, Maj. Gen. H.H. Arnold and Gen. George C. Marshall are shown here at Randolph Field, Tex.

President Roosevelt—here at an airfield in Sicily talking with Arnold—believed the US had to gear up for war. He sought a huge increase in military aircraft and pilots.



wars in Europe and Asia—events that sparked calls for an expansion of airpower and reorganization of the Army air element. Particularly disturbing to Arnold and President Roosevelt was the major role the German air force played in the defeat of France in 1940. FDR declared, “Military aviation is increasing at an unprecedented and alarming rate.” Consequently, he and Congress sought a huge increase in American aircraft and pilots.

Even before the outbreak of war, Roosevelt was much concerned about America’s lack of preparedness. In 1938, he sent his confidante, Harry Hopkins, on an inspection of US aircraft plants. Hopkins claimed Roosevelt “was sure we were going to get into war, and he believed that airpower would win it.”

Shortly thereafter, an airplane crash claimed the life of Maj. Gen. Oscar Westover, Chief of the Army Air Corps. Hopkins, who had the ear of the President, suggested he appoint Arnold to the post, which Roosevelt did in September 1938.

Roosevelt believed that America’s military had to immediately gear up for war. In mid-November 1938, he convened a meeting at the White House to consider responses to the events unfolding in Europe and Asia. Present were Arnold, Hopkins, Assistant Secretary of War Louis Johnson, and Brig. Gen. George C. Marshall, chief of the Army’s War Plans Division. Roosevelt directed increased aircraft production and by August 1940 the Air Corps had completed an

expansion plan, envisioning production each year of 12,000 new pilots and 54 combat-ready groups.

The Eye-Opener

Marshall, subsequently promoted to Army Chief of Staff, shared Roosevelt’s concern and, moreover, agreed with Arnold that the Air Corps required a stronger ability to plan for expansion. The Air Corps had found an invaluable ally in the struggle for a more powerful air force. In 1938, Maj. Gen. Frank M. Andrews, then commanding General Headquarters Air Force, had taken Marshall on a nine-day tour of air bases, inspecting units and meeting senior Air Corps commanders as well as visiting the Boeing plant in Seattle. Marshall and Andrews struck a close relationship. Later, Marshall said this tour had opened his eyes to what air forces could do and what they required. He quickly determined that airmen best knew how to run the Air Corps and make it work.

On this cross-country trip, Andrews had taken the opportunity to make Marshall aware of conflicts between the few airmen and the many ground officers assigned to the General Staff. In later remarks, Marshall said he realized that “air had almost no representation on the General Staff,” and most of the General Staff types “had little interest in the air, mostly antipathy, and it was quite marked.” Indeed, Marshall added, “I found everyone on the Staff hostile to Air.”

Marshall was greatly impressed with Andrews. In August 1939, he

made the airman assistant chief of staff for operations and training, the first airman ever to serve in this position. Subsequently, when Marshall became Army Chief of Staff, he named Andrews to positions of theater command in the Caribbean and the Middle East and as commanding general of US forces in the European theater. Tragically, in May 1943, Andrews was killed in an airplane crash in Iceland, cutting short a brilliant career of one of the nation’s most distinguished airmen.

The Luftwaffe’s performance in Europe in 1940 increased Congressional pressure for the creation of a separate Air Force, but Arnold was convinced that this was not the right time to divide the air arm from the rest of the Army. Marshall and Arnold needed a rapid, efficient expansion of the Air Corps itself to prepare for the possibility of war. Arnold emphasized in 1940 that “right at this minute it looks to me as if it might be a serious mistake to change the existing setup when we are all using every facility available in order to take care of the present expansion of the Air Corps.” Any serious organizational change now might actually impede the buildup.

Fortunately, Arnold and Marshall maintained confidence in each other, with Arnold agreeing not to press for independence. He would, instead, count on Marshall to provide an appropriate degree of autonomy during this period of national emergency. For his part, Marshall was determined to see that the air arm got



Maj. Gen. Frank Andrews had the foresight to take Marshall, then chief of the Army's War Plans Division, on a tour of air bases in 1938. Later, Marshall said the tour opened his eyes to the capabilities of air and its needs.

what it required in organizational flexibility, as well as equipment. This meant that he would have to present a rationale to the War Department Staff and make organizational changes that would have credibility with airmen.

The ABC Meetings

The airmen's drive to gain more freedom from the War Department had been boosted early in 1941 when representatives of Britain's armed services came to the US for strategy discussions, which became known as American-British Conversations (ABC-1). These ABC-1 meetings between a US staff committee and the British delegation were held in the period January-March 1941, and they ranged over topics as varied as strategy, joint operations, geographical responsibilities, and command arrangements.

Air Vice Marshal John C. Slessor represented the Royal Air Force, and Col. Joseph T. McNarney sat in for the Air Corps. The purpose of the conversations was to determine the best means with which the US and British might defeat Germany and her allies "should the United States be compelled to resort to war."

The Anglo-American representatives agreed that, in event of war in both Europe and the Pacific, the major effort would first be made in Europe. This would include a sustained air offensive against Nazi Germany. A strategic defensive

would be mounted in the Far East. Arnold noted that, in early 1941, "We were planning for war, even though we were not in it." In response to the British request for American-produced aircraft, he emphasized to Marshall and Roosevelt that "we must first meet our own requirements" and then should give allies "only such items as they could use effectively."

These talks subsequently led to formal creation in August 1941 of the Combined Chiefs of Staff representing the British and US military forces—including Arnold, representing American airpower. Arnold, of course, was subordinate to Marshall, Army Chief of Staff. However, it was necessary for Arnold to be present when the Combined Chiefs formulated grand strategy. Thus, the air forces' movement toward autonomy was aided by the fact that the RAF had long ago gained independence and its opposite American number needed to be at the table.

"I often wondered," Arnold later noted, "how I came to be included at Argentia [in Newfoundland, site of the meeting that founded the CCS]. Prior to that time, Air items on a higher level had been handled by the Chief of Staff and by the General Staff. At all conferences, even though an Air representative sat in, the General Staff or the Chief of Staff did the talking."

Subsequently, Arnold learned that Hopkins had insisted on Arnold's attendance at the conference. Hop-

kins, for his part, continued to press for an airpower buildup. "I don't know why," he exclaimed "we are producing 600,000 automobiles for pleasure-seeking people, when we need airplanes and engines!"

Bureaucratic Behemoth

The Air Corps continued to have difficulty prompting meaningful action on air matters from the War Department General Staff. Marshall knew that officers on the General Staff failed properly to support the airmen. As a result, air actions tended to be postponed and bottlenecks appeared. The General Staff, Marshall said, had "lost track of its purpose," becoming, in his view, "a huge, bureaucratic, red tape-ridden operating agency." He added, "It had slowed down everything."

In summer 1940, Marshall asked Arnold to provide his views on reorganization. Marshall was concerned not only about air matters; he believed that the War Department had evolved into "the poorest command post in the Army." Arnold responded by proposing the appointment of three Army deputy chiefs of staff—for ground, air, and service forces. However, the War Department Staff opposed this step and remained committed to the idea that the mission of the air arm was to support the ground forces.

Still navigating between the War Department Staff and the airmen, Marshall in October 1940 named Arnold his acting deputy chief of staff for air—responsible for coordinating all air matters—and Maj. Gen. George H. Brett as acting chief of the Air Corps. However, the GHQ Air Force was removed from the jurisdiction of the Office of the Chief of Air Corps, assigned to General Headquarters, and placed under the direct control of the commander of Army field forces.

This setback was ameliorated in December 1940 when the Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson, named Robert A. Lovett to be special assistant to the Secretary of War (redesignated in April 1941 "assistant secretary of war for air"). Lovett would make the case for airpower directly to Stimson. A banker well-informed on the subject of aircraft manufacturing, Lovett surveyed the industry with an eye to substantially increasing production. His main job was to improve delivery of aircraft over-

seas while maintaining a balance between the needs of foreign clients and those of the Army air arm.

Marshall wanted all air matters handled by Arnold, unencumbered by General Staff objections and delaying tactics. The Army Chief of Staff emphasized: "I want this procedure put in force without delay. The Air Corps has a tremendous procurement program tied in with new developments and now has a tremendous personnel problem. ... They will be turning out pilots initially at the rate of 7,000 a year. We have to operate on a simpler basis than our present system. I desire to proceed on a basis of evolution and general understanding between all."

In early 1941, Marshall and Lovett met with Stimson, impressing on him the need for more freedom and flexibility for Army airmen who were being asked to build up the air forces as rapidly as possible. Although Lovett favored an independent Air Force, he emphasized to Stimson a need for a reorganization that would provide tactical independence in a time of crisis.

Auxiliary No More

Stimson evidently found Lovett's case to be compelling. He stated, "Air warfare involves not merely a new auxiliary weapon for the ground troops. ... [I]t is becoming clear now that it involves independent action quite divorced from land and sea. The difficulty is finding just how far to go in freeing them, but it seems to be my job now to try to solve that. It is a very big one." Stimson truly believed that "the moment has now come" to develop a strong American Air Force.

The issue was how to give the Army Air Corps sufficient autonomy while keeping it part of the Army. Brig. Gen. Carl A. Spaatz, chief of Arnold's Plans Division, had been working on this problem even as Lovett's staff struggled with this issue. Spaatz and Lovett agreed that the solution lay in revising Army Regulation 95-5, which described the position of the Air Corps in the Army. Lovett and Spaatz briefed Arnold, who in turn, took the idea to Marshall. Stimson meanwhile, was bearing down on the problem, emphasizing that staff work required decentralization, "to permit Air Force autonomy in the degree needed."



USAF photo

In October 1940, Maj. Gen. George Brett became acting Chief of the Air Corps when Marshall named Arnold his acting deputy chief of staff for air. In June 1941, Arnold became Chief of the new Army Air Forces, which included the Army Air Corps and Air Force Combat Command.

The Air Corps, he said, should be "as modern as the instrument it uses."

This confluence of thought proved decisive because Stimson was under heavy pressure from Congress to grant more freedom to the Air Corps. In May 1941, Marshall stepped in and informed Stimson that a revision of Army Regulation 95-5 was ready for implementation. "It thus gave me something with which to meet the threat of an independent Air Corps created by (Congressional) legislation," said Stimson.

A leading proponent of independence was Hugh J. Knerr, who served as Andrews's chief of staff at GHQ Air Force in the late 1930s. Knerr subsequently had been relieved and ostracized for beating the independence theme and in late 1938 had left the Air Corps. On the outside, he continued to agitate for independence.

Another proponent was Andrews, who in early 1941 was commanding general, Panama Canal Air Force. He maintained that the Army's air arm could not be properly developed "under an organization which considers it an adjunct of surface forces, even with a man as broad-

minded and farseeing as Marshall at the head of the Army." He added, "No matter how progressive Marshall may be himself, the rank and file of the Army has not changed materially."

Andrews, who did not always see eye-to-eye with Arnold, nonetheless considered him "a good politician" and was confident that Arnold could handle this issue.

Taking the Step

Having gotten a green light from Stimson, Marshall on June 20, 1941, put into effect revised Army Regulation 95-5—redefining the organization and functions of the Air Corps—and officially established the Army Air Forces. It gave Arnold the title of Chief, AAF (he continued to be deputy chief of staff for air), responsible to the Army Chief of Staff and the Secretary of War. Under 95-5, Arnold had the authority to coordinate the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps (Maj. Gen. George Brett) and Air Force Combat Command (Lt. Gen. Delos C. Emmons), redesignated from the GHQ Air Force and which previously had reported directly to Marshall. Combat Command



Secretary of War Henry Stimson (right) with Marshall. Stimson recognized that the Air Corps needed autonomy and believed “the moment has now come.”

would develop air doctrine and plans for operational training. The Chief of the Air Corps would supervise research and development, supply, and maintenance.

Most important was the fact that the revised regulation provided Arnold with an Air Staff to formulate policy and plans. As one historian noted, the Air Staff—a title borrowed from the British—was created “to encourage more intelligent planning for the future.” Arnold named Spaatz to be chief of the Air Staff and Lt. Col. Harold L. George as head of the new Air War Plans Division.

Additionally, the Air Staff included assistant chiefs of staff for personnel, intelligence, and materiel, maintenance, and distribution. The Air Staff also included an air inspector and air adjutant general.

It was a major step in the institutionalization of the nation’s airpower, but it wasn’t a cure-all. Formation of the Air Staff failed to break Arnold of one of his bad habits—his addiction to calling informally on trusted individuals to carry out various assignments. He subsequently created a group of close personal advisors to review current policies and to undertake specific tasks.

Thus, Arnold’s advisory council became his own personal group of “idea men.” In World War II, this council at various times included Colonels Jacob E. Smart, Fred M. Dean, Emmett O’Donnell Jr., Charles P. Cabell, and Lauris Norstad.

Smart recalled that Arnold had directed him to spend all of his time “thinking” rather than dealing with mundane staff matters. However, Arnold on one occasion had failed to convince Marshall of something or other, and he admonished Smart: “From now on, you spend 30 percent of your time thinking and 70 percent on how to sell an idea.”

As it happened, the new Air Staff barely had caught its breath before being faced with a large challenge. The German war machine had major spectacular victories in Europe, Britain’s plight grew desperate, and the Roosevelt Administration continued to prepare for war. The ABC-1 discussions and the subsequent Rainbow No. 5 war plan stipulated that for the United States the European theater would be decisive.

Following establishment of the AAF with its Air Staff, Arnold directed expansion of the Staff’s Air War Plans Division. He named George to organize and enlarge the division “to develop overall plans for the Army Air Forces.”

The Barbarossa Factor

The war took a new turn when Hitler, on June 22, 1941, launched Operation Barbarossa—a massive, full-scale invasion of the Soviet

Union. In early July 1941, Roosevelt—having stressed the importance of air expansion—ordered the War Department to develop an estimate “of the overall production requirements required to defeat our potential enemies.” The President wanted prompt action. The War Plans Division of the War Department prepared to respond.

However, at the insistence of Spaatz and George, Arnold recommended to the War Department that the Air War Plans Division of the Air Staff prepare the air requirements as directed by Roosevelt. Brig. Gen. Leonard T. Gerow, head of the War Department’s War Plans Division agreed, and as a result, the now-famous AWPD-1 air war plan was born. Written by George, Lt. Col. Kenneth N. Walker, Maj. Laurence S. Kuter, and Maj. Haywood S. Hansell Jr., it described requirements for wartime victory in the air.

The creation of the Army Air Forces and its Air Staff did not, of course, solve all problems of air coordination. Marshall demonstrated an understanding of the need for improved efficiency and coordination between airmen and others on the War Department General Staff. His close relationship with Arnold prefigured the sound partnership between the two during the war. Marshall and Arnold, in their own ways, had carried on a campaign designed to gain more freedom and flexibility for Army airmen.

Nonetheless, the War Department’s War Plans Division still blocked the AAF from a clear, sustained role in overall strategic planning. Even greater freedom with complete autonomy would have to wait until early 1942 when the AAF would become coequal with Army Ground Forces and Services of Supply.

By that time, Arnold’s Air Staff had made its mark and would continue to do so throughout the war. It shaped Army Air Forces plans, strategy, and resources. Moreover, with great foresight, the expanded Air Staff (at Arnold’s direction) created detailed plans to organize an independent Air Force once the war was over. ■

Herman S. Wolk is senior historian in the Air Force History Support Office. He is the author of The Struggle for Air Force Independence, 1943–1947 (1997), and a coauthor of Winged Shield, Winged Sword: A History of the United States Air Force (1997). His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, “Truman’s War,” appeared in the November 2000 issue.