Along with Arnold, he prepared the way for the rise of airpower in World War II.

The Influence of Frank Andrews

In early 1943, Lt. Gen. Frank M. Andrews was killed in the crash of his B-24 Liberator just as he stood on the threshold of playing a key role in the Allied victory in Europe. Andrews, at the time of his death, was commander of United States forces in the European Theater of Operations and as such was in charge of the overall direction of the US strategic bombing campaign as well as planning for the invasion of the Continent.

The death of Andrews was a major blow. Even before the war ended Gen. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, Commanding General of the Army Air Forces, renamed the Army Air Field at Camp Springs, Md., for the fallen airman. For decades Andrews Air Force Base has been the “gateway to the capital” for Presidents and foreign leaders, and today it is far more famous than the person for whom it was named. Most are unaware that Andrews was one of the founding fathers of the Air Force.

The significance of his career does not revolve around the circumstances of his death or what “might have been” had he lived longer. It rests instead on the unique role he actually played during his military service. He was responsible for orchestrating sweeping changes to the pre-war Army Air Corps. He prepared the way for the wartime Army Air Forces and postwar US Air Force.

Andrews was commissioned in 1906 at West Point and served in the cavalry until 1917. He transferred to aviation as a major during World War I and earned his pilot’s wings in 1918. Later, he served in Air Service staff and command billets at home and overseas, as well as on the War Department General Staff. In 1928, he finished the Air Corps Tactical School at Langley Field, Va., and, unlike most airmen, graduated from both the Army Command and General Staff School and the Army War College.

The court-martial in December 1925 and resignation in February 1926 of Army Brig. Gen. William L. “Billy” Mitchell was a turning point for the Army air arm. In the wake of that episode, experienced Army airmen such as Majors Andrews and Arnold concluded that the overall goal of building a separate Air Force—Mitchell’s goal and theirs—could be achieved only by means of
an evolutionary process from within the War Department.

They believed two intermediate steps lay between the status quo Air Corps of the interwar years and an independent Air Force of the future. First, they recognized that the air arm would have to consolidate all domestic Army air combat forces under the central command of a single air officer. Second, the air arm would have to gain a large measure of autonomy in the War Department and use it to demonstrate the capabilities of airpower.

In both cases, Andrews was to play a leading role.

**GHQ Air Force**

Following World War I, centralized command of Army air combat units was the subject of a major debate. The Chief of the Air Service was neither a commander of combat forces nor a member of the War Department General Staff. Like the Chief of Infantry, he headed an Army combat arm but possessed no actual command authority over combat units in the field. Higher command over air combat units was fragmented among the nine Army corps area commanders, none of whom were air officers.

In the interwar period, a series of outside blue-ribbon advisory panels studied this issue for the Secretary of War. The work culminated in 1934 when the Baker Board recommended the consolidation of the Air Corps combat units under a single air officer. That “air force” commander would operate in wartime directly under the commander of Army field forces, working from a command post called General Headquarters, or GHQ, that would be created during wartime. The proposed combat air command would be the GHQ Air Force.

To prevent the de facto development of an autonomous air component within the War Department, the General Staff insisted that the proposed GHQ Air Force commander be independent of the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps. Thus, Maj. Gen. Benjamin D. Foulois, an airman who was the Chief of the Air Corps, would not gain command of GHQ Air Force but would continue to have oversight of noncombatant Air Corps functions, such as individual training, equipment development, and personnel management.

The Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Douglas A. MacArthur, approved this concept with its implied acknowledgment that the “air force” had a legitimate interest in conducting independent operations quite apart from support for land forces.

However, everyone recognized that these air combat units could not be created overnight, after wartime mobilization began, and so they would have to be in place in peacetime—prior to activation of the Army’s wartime GHQ. The critical question was this: What would happen to command arrangements in times of peace when no GHQ even existed? The solution was that the designated commander of GHQ Air Force would report to the Army Chief of Staff, just like Foulois, the Chief of the Air Corps.

Thus the Army’s air arm would be subdivided into a combat component (GHQ Air Force) and a support component (the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps), each independent of the other. Few believed that the division of command would yield the most effective employment of air assets. Still, centralized command under a single air officer of all air combat forces was itself a major step forward, allowing for rapid concentration of air combat units against a threat.

In the mid–1930s, the Army air combat contingent comprised only 32 squadrons, parceled out to nine combat groups. One of the groups was the historic 1st Pursuit Group at Selfridge Field, Mich., which was commanded by Andrews, who was well-prepared for the task of shaping up an effective air combat arm.

In late 1934, the Army cut short Andrews’s command tour at the 1st Pursuit Group and detailed him back to the General Staff to work on the GHQ Air Force project. Not long after his return to Washington, MacArthur selected Andrews to organize and command GHQ Air Force at Langley Field.

MacArthur activated GHQ Air Force on March 1, 1935, with Andrews as commander, a move that brought Andrews a double promotion to the temporary grade of brigadier general. Col. Hugh J. Knerr was his chief of staff and Lt. Col. George C. Kenney his G-3 (operations staff officer). As consolidated under GHQ Air Force, each of the nine combat groups—based at eight different locations coast to coast—was assigned to one of three composite wings. These bombardment, attack, and pursuit groups represented GHQ Air Force’s strategic, tactical, and air defense missions.

Arnold, newly promoted to brigadier, led the 1st Wing at March Field, Calif., with one attack and two bombardment groups. On the Atlantic coast, the 2nd Wing, with two bombardment and two pursuit groups,
was the largest of the three subordinate commands, consisting of 15 flying squadrons and headquarters at Langley Field. In the south, the 3rd Wing, smallest of the three, operated from Barksdale Field, La. It had one pursuit and one attack group.

By December 1935 Army leadership had turned over, with MacArthur succeeded by Gen. Malin Craig. Andrews—who who answered to Craig—was promoted to temporary major general. Foulois retired in that same month and his assistant, Oscar Westover, a former balloonist, became Chief of the Air Corps. Hap Arnold, who begged to stay at March Field with the flying units, was sent to Washington to become Westover’s assistant.

Amid all of the bureaucratic shuffling, Andrews faced a major problem: He had no truly effective long-range, heavy bombers to carry out the kinds of independent air missions fundamental to the GHQ Air Force concept. Solving that problem was one of his most pressing tasks, and it was only because of the persistence and tenacity of Andrews and his chief of staff, Knerr, that Boeing’s new, four-engine B-17 bomber reached full deployment status. It was a fight that nearly ended his career.

The first B-17 Flying Fortresses were assigned in 1937 to the 2nd Bomb Group at Langley, led by Lt. Col. Robert Olds. The 2nd BG served, in effect, as the operational test bed for this important weapons system. One of Olds’s operations officers, 1st Lt. Curtis E. LeMay, was not only a pilot but also an expert navigator and bombardier.

**Bomber Demonstrations**

Andrews was fond of demonstrating the capabilities of the big bomber. For instance, in February 1938, six B-17s from the 2nd BG under Olds’s command made a 5,225-mile Goodwill Flight that included stops from Miami to Buenos Aires and the return to Langley. Later, on May 12, 1938, during Army–Navy war games, Andrews proved that a B-17 could intercept an “enemy aircraft carrier” (the role was played by an Italian ocean liner) when three of the big bombers located the ship more than 700 miles offshore in the Atlantic. The lead navigator was LeMay.

By the summer of 1938, however, the B-17 was in trouble, with the War Department threatening to shut down production in a cost-cutting effort. Senior Army officers believed that larger numbers of short- and medium-range, twin-engine bombers could do a better job than smaller numbers of large, expensive, long-range bombers with four engines. Andrews, still a temporary major general, invited Brig. Gen. George C. Marshall, new chief of war plans on the General Staff, for an all-day briefing at his Langley Field headquarters. Marshall accepted and was favorably impressed.

Shortly afterward, Marshall accompanied Andrews on an extended inspection trip to GHQ Air Force combat units across the country, as well as visits to Air Corps support installations and several aircraft manufacturing plants. A crucial stop came at the Boeing plant in Seattle, where Marshall was allowed to see firsthand the B-17 production line. Marshall became convinced that the aircraft was not only useful but critical to US defenses. Marshall’s opinion eventually went a long way toward saving the controversial aircraft, which Army officers derided as “Andrews’s Folly.”

Moreover, Marshall’s trip with Andrews marked the beginning of a professional relationship between the two that would be of great importance to the future of the Army air arm.

Andrews spent four crucial years as head of GHQ Air Force. His actions did not sit well with Craig, the Chief of Staff of the Army. On March 1, 1939, Andrews completed his command tour at GHQ Air Force, but Craig declined to offer Andrews a new assignment in a general officer’s post. He thus was forced to revert to his permanent grade of colonel and was sent to San Antonio, as VIII Corps air officer, finding himself in exactly the same job as that to which Billy Mitchell had been relegated in 1925. Craig’s decision, however, could not change the fact that the consolidation of air combat units under Andrews in GHQ Air Force represented an important milestone in the strategic development of American airpower.

**FDR’s Surprise**

Unlike Mitchell, however, Andrews did not see his career collapse in Texas. Four months after his exile, on July 1, 1939, Craig went on terminal leave prior to his planned Sept. 1 retirement. Craig could not have known that President Franklin D. Roosevelt would pass over scores of more senior generals to reach down and select Marshall to become the new Army Chief of Staff, but that is what happened.

Marshall took charge immediately as acting Chief of Staff. One of his first actions—taken despite fierce objections from Craig—was to recall Andrews to Washington in August as the assistant chief of staff for
operations and training, the G-3 of the entire Army. Andrews also was promoted to the permanent grade of brigadier general.

In this remarkable turn of events, Andrews, who had for so long had to fight the War Department General Staff in trying to build an effective air combat force, held a position of first among equals on the General Staff. It was a historic appointment; he was the first airman to head a General Staff division. It was especially important in light of the fact that, in just over a month, war erupted in Europe.

In that key post within, Andrews was able to formulate Army-wide policy on important issues of concern to the air arm, such as doctrine for close air support of ground forces. And, for the first time, air officers were assigned in significant numbers to the War Department General Staff. Andrews was also able to advise Marshall on a whole range of issues regarding further development of the nation’s airpower, as it became increasingly evident that the United States would not be able to avoid involvement in the war.

Building an effective air force also required a large measure of autonomy for airmen. Andrews never had it during his time as the commander of GHQ Air Force, but during his Langley years and later in Washington, he played a key role in laying the foundation for virtual autonomy.

Now it was time for him to leave Washington. Issues of Western hemisphere defense came to the forefront in fall 1940, and Marshall decided to reassign Andrews to the Canal Zone to organize air defenses of the Panama Canal. His Panama Canal Air Force became the prototype for all subsequent overseas air forces.

With the departure of Andrews from the General Staff, Marshall took another bold step, this one involving Hap Arnold, who had become Air Corps Chief, succeeding Westover when the latter died in a crash in 1938. Marshall gave Arnold the additional title of acting deputy chief of staff for air. That appointment enhanced Arnold’s standing considerably within the War Department and enabled him to fill the gap on Marshall’s staff created by Andrews’s reassignment.

Now, Army Air Forces

Six months later, in March 1941, the GHQ Air Force flag at Langley was shifted to Bolling Field, D.C. Marshall soon approved the concept of an umbrella organization to coordinate operations of both GHQ Air Force and the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps, to be called Army Air Forces.

On June 20, 1941, Arnold was reassigned as Chief, Army Air Forces. Simultaneously, GHQ Air Force became Air Force Combat Command.

Late in 1941, on the eve of America’s entry into World War II, Marshall took two steps to enhance further the standing of the air arm within the War Department. First, he advanced Andrews to lieutenant general and reassigned him as commander of Caribbean Defense Command, making him the first airman to head a unified theater command overseas. Andrews’s pioneering work as a joint forces commander established valuable precedents both for directing theater commands overseas in wartime and for integrating air forces in such commands. Second, Marshall approved a plan to reorganize the War Department

In a 1938 demonstration of the big bomber's potential, three B-17s—with lead navigator Curtis LeMay—intercepted this “enemy aircraft carrier” (an Italian ocean liner) more than 700 miles out to sea.

Arnold (left) and Andrews (center) appear together in 1943, about the time Andrews was tapped to head US forces in the European Theater at which post he was to direct aerial bombing of Germany and plan a land invasion.
In March 1943, Andrews inspects members of the 303rd Bomb Group, stationed in England. A few months later, Andrews died in a B-24 crash on a mountaintop in Iceland.

so as to give the Army Air Forces parity with ground components. However, the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor delayed implementation a few months. The restructuring finally went into effect March 9, 1942, introducing fundamental changes of great significance to the air arm.

Both the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps and Air Force Combat Command (GHQ Air Force) were abolished. Their functions were merged into the Army Air Forces, whose Chief, Arnold, became Commanding General. Furthermore, a new Air Staff, separate from the War Department General Staff, was created for the Army Air Forces, which emerged with a standing in the Department equal to the new Army Ground Forces and Army Services of Supply.

Arnold’s post as deputy chief of staff of the Army for air put the Army Air Forces on a level different from the other two components in the War Department. Consequently, Marshall arranged for the AAF to have a seat at both the Anglo–American Combined Chiefs of Staff and US Joint Chiefs of Staff. Thus, the AAF finally achieved the virtual autonomy that GHQ Air Force needed but never had. This was the second major step on the road toward a separate Air Force. It rested on the perceptive understanding Marshall had of airpower, fostered by his close association with Andrews.

Late in 1942, Marshall moved Andrews from Caribbean Defense Command to leadership of US forces in the Middle East. Andrews was in that post for only a short time but he established Ninth Air Force within his Middle East command, the first “tactical” air force to drop bombs in Europe.

Early in 1943, at the Casablanca Conference, Marshall nominated Andrews as commander of the US European Theater of Operations, to direct the American aerial bombing campaign against Germany and plan for the eventual land invasion of the European continent. It was Andrews’s third joint theater command.

On the other side of the world, Andrews’s former G-3 at Langley, George Kenney, was leading the air war for MacArthur in the Southwest Pacific Theater. Elsewhere, other veterans of the GHQ Air Force era occupied important positions in the command structure, at home and overseas. GHQ Air Force had indeed, as Arnold recognized, been the forerunner of the Army Air Forces, laying the foundation for its success in wartime. During World War II he wrote, “Today, when American bombers fly a successful mission in any theater of war, their achievement goes back to the blueprints of the General Headquarters Air Force. Our operations were based on the needs and problems of our own hemisphere, with its vast seas, huge land areas, great distances, and varying terrains and climates. If we could fly here, we could fly anywhere, and such has proved to be the case.”

For Andrews, promotion to full general was on the horizon. The end, however, came abruptly on May 3, 1943, when he died on a rugged mountaintop in Iceland. An editorial in the New York Times compared Andrews to Billy Mitchell, noting that “not even General Mitchell plugged harder for the Army air arm.”

At a memorial service for Andrews in the chapel at Ft. Myer, Va., Marshall himself gave the eulogy. He reminded the mourners, “No Army produces more than a few great captains.” He added, “General Andrews was undoubtedly one of these.”

Andrews’s dream of a separate Air Force needed four more years to come to fruition, but his contemporaries knew well the importance of the role he had played. In July 1947, President Harry Truman signed the National Security Act authorizing a separate Air Force within a unified National Military Establishment. That bill transferred the dormant statutory functions of the Commanding General of GHQ Air Force to the Chief of Staff of the new US Air Force. Forty-five years later, in June 1992, domestic air combat units—bombardment, attack, and fighter—were once again consolidated under a single air officer at Langley comparable to what had happened there in 1935.

Air Combat Command, directed from the same historic building from which Andrews led GHQ Air Force, shares a striking conceptual similarity to Andrews’s major air command. That parallel can serve as a reminder of the unique role Andrews played in shaping the course of events that transformed the Army air arm into the United States Air Force.