



**Gen. Ira Eaker was a blend of operational talent, leadership, shrewdness, and salesmanship.**

# Eaker's Way



*Eaker led air campaigns throughout the European Theater. In the center of this photo, Eaker is planning air support for the attack on Anzio-Nettuno in Italy. He is flanked by Maj. Gen. Nathan Twining (left) and Maj. Gen. John Cannon.*

By Rebecca Grant



**Gen. Ira C. Eaker** helped shape World War II airpower and pave the way for an independent United States Air Force. For those and other reasons, his name is respected, yet his historical image is often overshadowed by his more prominent colleagues and friends, Gen. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold and Gen. Carl A. “Tooy” Spaatz.

Eaker was the youngest of these three generals, and biographer James Parton—who had been his wartime aide—described Eaker as forever the third of the “three musketeers.”

He made his mark early as an operator and grew into a commander who put combat priorities first. Eaker also set himself apart with his passion for writing, public speaking, and personal persuasion. Among those who gained an appreciation of airpower from him was none other than Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

It takes a few stories, however, to show Eaker in something like true perspective.

### The Pioneer

An airplane that set down in an emergency landing at Ft. Bliss, Tex., in 1917 changed everything for Eaker, who was an infantry second lieutenant. He walked over to the airplane to see if he could help the pilot. Eaker examined the engine, reattached a spark plug lead, and helped the pilot turn the propeller to crank the engine. The pilot was an Army Signal Corps recruiter, and he had gotten his man.

Lieutenant Eaker trained at Kelly Field, Tex., and was posted to San Diego’s Rockwell Field. Eaker missed overseas duty in World War I, but, in a way, that proved to be fortunate. The commanding officer at Rockwell Field was Col. Henry H. Arnold, and his executive officer was Maj. Carl A. Spaatz. These veteran airmen appointed 22-year-old Eaker as their post adjutant.

For the next 20 years, Eaker distinguished himself through his zest for flying challenges of all kinds and his increasing skill in command and advocacy of airpower.

He was in Washington, D.C., for the court-martial of Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell, which helped further to strengthen the bond between Arnold, Spaatz, and Eaker.

Maj. Gen. Mason M. Patrick, the Chief of Air Service, assigned Eaker to locate Air Service records to help

Mitchell prepare his testimony. Soon, Eaker was meeting at night with Arnold and Spaatz, going over the day’s events. Patrick counseled the officers not to get carried away with their support of Mitchell, because it could torpedo their careers. (See “The Spirit of Billy Mitchell,” June 1996, p. 66.)

As Eaker recalled years later: “We talked it over, faced up to it, and decided to go ahead with it anyhow.”

Eaker was too junior to testify and, unlike Arnold, he escaped banishment, but the experience left its mark. He came to respect Patrick’s steady, disciplined advocacy of airpower and thought ultimately that Patrick had achieved real gains. Eaker himself opted to take a little of Mitchell and a lot of Patrick to become a persuasive airpower advocate himself.

However, it was flying that guaranteed his place in the tiny airpower community of the interwar years. He was selected for a five-month goodwill tour across South America in 1927.

Two years later, he was a natural choice for another grueling adventure: the flight of *Question Mark*, which he undertook with Spaatz, 1st Lt. Harry A. Halverson, 2nd Lt. Elwood R. Quesada, and flight mechanic Sgt. Roy W. Hooe. Together, they took on the aerial refueling endurance record that then stood at 37 hours. (See “*Question Mark*,” March 2003, p. 66.)

Eaker was chief pilot, while Spaatz was flight commander, boom operator, and hose connector, all in one. *Question Mark* took off on Jan. 1, 1929, with the idea of showing off for crowds at the Rose Bowl. It remained aloft for more than six days.

Characteristically, Eaker’s report on the experience cited the technical and operational factors. Refueling was not really practical in the underpowered aircraft of the day because the equipment required reduced the bomb load, he concluded.

Eaker worked to improve instrument flying, and, in 1936, he completed the first cross-country instrument flight.

Eaker was still a captain when he set out to do all he could to promote airpower to the public. He and Arnold eventually co-authored three books pumping Army airpower. *This Flying Game* appeared in 1936, followed by *Winged Warfare* in 1941 and *Army Flyer* in 1942.

In 1937, he began a tour in Washington in public affairs. The two sides of Eaker came together spectacularly in 1938. Eaker helped arrange for



**In 1926, Eaker was one of 10 pilots selected for a five-month South American goodwill tour that stretched into 1927. Eaker (left) is shown with 1st Lt. Muir Fairchild, Eaker's crewmate for the South American mission.**

three B-17s to intercept the Italian ocean liner *Rex*, as it sailed toward New York.

First Lt. Curtis E. LeMay did the navigation. The B-17s found their quarry several hundred miles out, photographed it, and made all the front pages. The incident so irked the Navy that it protested that the airmen were getting in the way of the Navy's right to control the sea-lanes.

In 1940, Arnold sent Eaker off to a tactical command, the 20th Pursuit Group at Hamilton Field, Calif. Eaker threw himself into large-scale operational maneuvers. He also flew early test models of the P-47 and the P-51. He was ready for the next major step: command of Eighth Air Force.

First as bomber commander, then overall commander, it was here that Eaker won fame. *Impact, the Army Air Forces' "Confidential" Picture History of World War II* listed Eaker among the "great captains of air war."

### On to England

Eaker's mission was to build up forces for a heavy bomber offensive. It was every bit an expeditionary operation. He had to start from scratch, and the place to start was as an understudy to Arthur T. "Bomber" Harris. (See "Bomber Harris," January, p. 68.)

Harris and Eaker hit it off right away. They had met in Washington in January 1942 and agreed to disagree on the merits of night bombing—then the RAF specialty—versus daylight bombing. By February, Eaker was a live-in guest

of Harris at his command post in High Wycombe.

At first, Eaker really had no air forces at all. In February 1942, the Eighth had a staff of six in England. The advance echelon made it over by convoy in May. Eaker had to borrow A-20s from a training unit to mount a raid on July

4, 1942. Eighth Air Force took delivery of its initial lot of 40 heavy bombers in mid-July.

Not until Aug. 17 did the first B-17s see action over occupied Europe. That raid on France marked the beginning of a buildup that did not culminate until the 1944 Normandy invasion was near. Eaker's sternest lessons were in aircraft supply, aircrew training, organization, and, of course, the weather.

"Weather greatly affected and sometimes controlled air operations," Eaker later wrote. Missions were often scrubbed for bad weather over the target or at the English airfields.

Gradually, Eaker built the mighty Eighth. There were 185,000 men and 4,000 airplanes on the books by December 1943. Eaker always paid close attention to technical and operational matters—including how to sortie and marshal hundreds of airplanes from dozens of separate airfields and point them toward their targets. Issues such as improving VHF radios and other equipment took much of his time.

To Eaker, the combat learning curve was manageable—it was logistics that remained the major challenge, especially because there he had to deal with the British allies. However, Eaker believed

**Eaker was involved with many prominent airpower events, including the flight of Question Mark, shown here. In 1929, Question Mark demonstrated aerial refueling possibilities and stayed aloft for almost seven days. Here, Question Mark takes on fuel from a tanker flying above it.**



## “This Is the Life”

Remember this episode as the quintessential portrait of Gen. Ira C. Eaker: When his Eighth Air Force B-17s were preparing for their first raid on the rail yards at Rouen on Aug. 17, 1942, Eaker decided to go with them.

Military policy frowned on attempts by senior officers to accompany their aircrews on missions. That was one thing Eaker's friend Gen. Carl A. Spaatz never got to do.

“Both men were privy to much secret information, and both men would be hard to replace if lost, so Spaatz had to stand down from the mission,” wrote Spaatz biographer David R. Mets.

Eaker decided to fly the mission regardless. He also made sure plenty of reporters would be on hand to cover the event.

On the afternoon before the mission, Eaker joined fellow officers on a duck shooting expedition at a nearby British country estate. While crawling under a fence to reach the shooting area, he accidentally rolled into a nest of hornets. The doctor found 27 hornet stingers in him—a near lethal dose. He gave Eaker antivenin medication and sedatives and then confined him to bed in the infirmary.

When the orderlies came to check on him the next morning, Eaker was gone. He was aloft in *Yankee Doodle*, the lead B-17 of the day's second formation. The B-17s of the 97th Bomb Group made their attack under Spitfire escort and—according to Eaker—scored hits on the rail yards. Flak was light and only a few FW-190s and Me-109s tangled with the Spitfires.

Spaatz and the reporters were there to greet the airplanes when they landed.

Eaker was grinning and jubilant. A reporter on the scene described him this way: “In this curiously divided personality, the flier is always dominant. ... Eaker's mantle of aloof and cosmopolitan dignity parted briefly and disclosed for an instant the tempestuous wind-driven airman within.”

Eaker was heard to say of the raid that he never got such a kick out of anything in his life. “When I saw that old, snub-nosed Focke-Wulf coming up at us, I said to myself, ‘Boy, this is the life!’”

he had an advantage over the RAF because the “operational level Air Force commander also commanded his supply and repair echelon,” a system gradually extended to the wing level for bombers and fighter bases alike. In his opinion, putting operations in command of maintenance worked well.

Eaker wasn't producing fast enough for Arnold. From Washington, Arnold kept constant pressure on Eaker, beating him up in private cables and letters just as if he were still the young lieutenant post adjutant. Spaatz was gentler by nature, and, being in theater, he and Eaker had more chances to meet.

Eaker also had to fight to continue daylight bombing. Harris wrote Arnold early on in 1942 that Eaker would “find it necessary to go easy with the daylight stuff until he has felt his way.” The problem was that by the end of 1942, the Eighth had barely mounted 1,000 sorties against targets on the continent. Harris had done more in one night with a 1,000-bomber raid on Germany.

In January 1943, Eaker got his chance to defend the strategy when he was summoned at the last minute to Casablanca. High-level summits in World War II were severe secrets, and even senior commanders usually had no idea they were taking place and received little advance notice of discussion topics.

At Casablanca, Churchill was going to pressure Roosevelt to put US bombers under RAF control and give

up daylight bombing. The Americans believed daylight bombing was the key to the top priority mission: destroying the Luftwaffe to win air superiority for an invasion of France. Army Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall, Lt. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, commanding general, European Theater of Operations, and Arnold had been planning on that invasion since the US joined the war. But Churchill had other notions.

Eaker's ability to write fast helped. In three hours, he drafted “The Case for Daylight Bombing” to give to Churchill, then added pages of extra arguments for Arnold's use. “I decided to back Eaker,” Churchill conceded, “and withdrew all my opposition to the daylight bombing.”

Brig. Gen. Haywood S. Hansell Jr., then 1st Bomb Wing commander in Eighth Air Force, concluded that if Eaker “had bowed to the RAF and British requirements to go in for night bombing, the whole course of the war would have been changed. It would have been quite impossible to defeat the German Air Force.”

Instead, Casablanca produced the Pointblank directives that set airpower to destroy German airplane production factories on the ground and fighters in the air.

### Unrelenting Fury

The Eighth's fiercest battles at places like Munster, Schweinfurt, and Regens-

burg were still ahead. The bombers were the only weapons capable of attacking Germany itself or doing battle with German forces in occupied Europe. As the RAF had already found, everyone was waiting eagerly for big blows to fall on the Nazi forces. Eaker's perseverance and stamina as a commander guided the Eighth and the bomber offensive through both heavy losses and high expectations.

With aircraft constantly being diverted to other theaters, Eaker struggled to mount the big raids needed for Pointblank. He pointed out: “Armies and navies do not fight every day, but for some reason the general public has come to expect air forces to fight daily.”

In the summer of 1943, Eaker's airmen started to deliver. Messerschmitt production plants at Regensburg and the ball bearing works at Schweinfurt were top targets. Schweinfurt, for example, accounted for 43 percent of Germany's ball-bearing production. (See “Against Regensburg and Schweinfurt,” September 1993, p. 48.)

Eaker sent two formations of bombers to Schweinfurt and Regensburg on Aug. 17, 1943. One group under LeMay shuttled on to land in North Africa.

The next day, Eaker woke up a B-17 crew that had made it safely back from Schweinfurt. They recruited a B-17 that had not gone on the raid because of a chronic engine oil leak. Some 30 hours later, Eaker was in North Africa with LeMay and his airmen to survey the damage and lift spirits. LeMay had lost 24 of 146 B-17s. Twenty more were beyond repair and 40 were seriously battle-damaged.

Through it all, Eaker had to take heat from Arnold pressuring him for more results. Still, Washington's pressures could scarcely have been as difficult as Eaker's decision to send bombers back for the second Schweinfurt raid in October 1943.

That raid was Eaker's vindication. Losses were still very high, but results were good. All agreed the German Air Force was losing the hard struggle. Most of all, the Eighth was now a battle-hardened force, ready to take losses from the German fighters and carry on. Eaker wrote Arnold: “We must continue the battle with unrelenting fury.”

But Eaker would not be the one to do it. Allied commanders were preparing for the invasion of France. The air forces were reshuffled.

Step one was the decision in early December 1943 to appoint Eisenhower



**Eaker was a master air planner with a gift for persuasion. In 1943, at Casablanca, he quickly persuaded Winston Churchill to abandon Churchill's ideas of putting US bombers under RAF control and abandoning daylight bombing operations.**

as supreme commander for Operation Overlord.

Step two was to redo the other command arrangements—it was this shift that separated Eaker from Eighth Air Force. A cable on Dec. 19 tentatively designated Eaker to take over command of the Allied Air Forces in the Mediterranean. Spaatz was to move to England in charge of the newly designated United States Strategic Air Forces in Europe—basically, a giant bomber command using the Eighth and the Fifteenth.

Tactical air for Normandy was to be concentrated under the Allied Expeditionary Air Forces. Lt. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle would come up to command the Eighth, while Maj. Gen. Nathan F. Twining took the Fifteenth.

Spaatz would have administrative command of all air units, although operational control of AEF was reserved for Eisenhower and his deputy. The transfer stood out as “the most painful transition in Eaker’s career,” as biographer Parton put it.

Eaker tried to prevent the change with cables to Arnold, Spaatz, and Eisenhower before he got his final orders. “Believe war interest best served by retention command Eighth Air Force,” his cable to Arnold began. Eaker pleaded that he had organized the Eighth from the start, and “it would be heartbreaking to leave just before climax” of the heavy bomber offensives.

However, the logic was inescapable. A British general was taking overall command in the Mediterranean so an

American air deputy was needed. There was no point doubling up Spaatz and Eaker in England.

It took Eisenhower to soothe the situation. “As you well know, I would be more than delighted to have you with me,” Eisenhower cabled to Eaker in late December. However, as Eisenhower pointed out, it was Arnold who had suggested the transfer of Eaker to the Mediterranean. “We do not (repeat not) have enough top men to concentrate them in one place,” Eisenhower finished.

### After the Eighth

Eaker faced new challenges in the Mediterranean, and becoming overall air commander was an upward move.

“General Eaker Moves Up,” blared a *New York Times* editorial headline.

As the dust settled, “there was not much concrete evidence to suggest that the transfer was anything other than Arnold said it was—a desire to spread his strongest commanders among the theaters,” wrote biographer David R. Mets.

In the Mediterranean, Eaker flourished. He directed air support for offensives in Italy. He set up liaisons with Tito’s partisans in Yugoslavia. He participated in shuttle bombing missions, from Italy to Germany, where aircraft went on

to land in Russia. From that experience, Eaker formed strong views on when to trust his Russian counterparts.

Still, a piece of his heart remained back in England. Eaker was in Russia on June 6, 1944, as the long-planned invasion of Normandy began. When he learned that the Luftwaffe didn’t show, Eaker called the moment “my greatest personal satisfaction in World War II.” The Eighth had done its job.

Marshall called Eaker back to Washington to take over as Arnold’s deputy in March 1945. Spaatz kept Eaker as his deputy when Spaatz became Chief of Staff. Here, Eaker’s timing was perfect, for he was in at the beginning of Air Force independence.

After he left the service in 1947, he became a vice president of Howard Hughes’ Toolco company. Hughes had just lost money on *Spruce Goose*.

After a few years of Eaker’s guidance, Hughes Aircraft grew from 800 to 27,000 employees and dominated the electronics and radar business on the West Coast.

Eaker the writer kept busy. He wrote a syndicated column on national defense for Copley News Service for 18 years, was a frequent lecturer, and, of course, contributed to *Air Force Magazine*. He brought curiosity and powers of observation to bear on anything that affected airpower, from engine problems to newspaper articles. According to Parton, Eaker published 329 periodical articles.

One of the most interesting was his lead-off essay for *Impact*. In it, Eaker listed the three main air missions in Europe in order: destruction of the German Air Force, support to Allied armies and navies, and demonstration of “strategic value” in attacks on Third Reich weapons-making and war-waging capacity. Eaker gave leadership, weapons, and organization the chief credit for the Allied air victories. Those factors were closely followed by good weather support, intelligence, and “command, control, and morale.”

In April 1985, Congress awarded him a fourth star. Gen. Charles A. Gabriel, Air Force Chief of Staff, welcomed the 89-year-old Eaker to the Pentagon to pin on the rank. ■

---

*Rebecca Grant is a contributing editor of Air Force Magazine. She is president of IRIS Independent Research in Washington, D.C., and has worked for RAND, the Secretary of the Air Force, and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. Grant is a fellow of the Eaker Institute for Aerospace Concepts, the public policy and research arm of the Air Force Association’s Aerospace Education Foundation. Her most recent article, “Total Force Turbulence,” appeared in the October issue.*