US airpower was ready for its independence. The North African debacle kicked away the last obstacles.

Up From Kasserine Pass

By Rebecca Grant

Rallying after losing to Rommel’s forces, US soldiers march through the Kasserine Pass (at left) and British grenadiers (below) reconnoiter on the slopes.

Caesar had the Rubicon. Paul had the road to Damascus. For American airpower, there was the Battle of Kasserine Pass.

German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel’s February 1943 rout of American forces in the Atlas Mountains of North Africa turned out to be a watershed event. In this desperate battle in Tunisia, US Army doctrine tied airpower, as an auxiliary force, to the corps commander—with disastrous results. US forces fought without effective air superiority or timely air support.

By summer, though, everything had changed. The July 1943 version of US Army Field Manual 100-20, Command and Employment of Airpower, stated
a new order of things. In it, the War Department, with support from Gen. George C. Marshall, declared, “Land power and airpower are co-equal and interdependent forces; neither is an auxiliary of the other.”

However, the full story is more complicated than that. In truth, most of the major changes in airpower thinking took place shortly before the battle at Kasserine Pass. Moreover, the big transformation of US air doctrine owed much to the strong but subtle influence of British airmen.

Since the war began, British military leaders had been hashing out unified air command arrangements across their arc of operations in the Mediterranean. In fluid desert battles, they found that air operations could provide the structure of, and set the conditions for, victory on the ground.

Though the RAF already had become a separate service, British commanders still had to work out complex arrangements for support of land and sea forces while struggling with acute shortages of aircraft and the power of the Luftwaffe.

Lack of situation awareness constituted a major obstacle to air support to ground forces in the seesaw desert battles. “The Army still seemed to be incapable of knowing the positions and movements of their own forces,” noted Air Marshal Arthur W. Tedder, who took over Middle East command in May 1941. “The ‘bomb line’ given by corps, if adhered to, would again and again have hamstrung our ability to give effective help in battle.”

Tedder also complained that the other services rarely let him know their air needs in time for the RAF to be of help.

However, by 1942, British forces had lashed together a unified air command and sophisticated air-ground liaison system. They recognized the importance of keeping air superiority, and they developed techniques for rapidly setting up advance airfields to push the attack on exposed maneuver forces.

British Beaufighters worked forward to spot targets for Wellington bombers. Command and control centers monitored ground battles in real time. Army and RAF commanders developed tight working relationships. The British Army’s definitive pamphlet on air support, published by Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery, actually was drafted by an RAF commander.

For British authorities bloodied by desert combat, there were three principal lesson.

**An Overwhelming Impact**

First, there would never be enough fighters, bombers, or transports to service the far-flung theater, so the air commander had to have the authority to send air where it was most needed. This was a bitter pill for British land and sea commanders, each of whom wanted to own a piece of airpower. Yet the senior leaders realized that, to use air most effectively, the air commander’s judgment had to stand independently.

Second, air superiority was the supreme requirement. Soldiers had come to know all too well the distinctive scream of the Stuka dive bomber. German air attack caused devastating disruption. Aircraft burning on the ground, airfields knocked out of action, and smoking tanks and vehicles strewn across the desert had become common sights.

Third, airpower, when properly employed, could produce an overwhelming impact on the course and outcome of warfare between surface forces. In other words, airpower, properly concentrated and applied, could exert a controlling influence over enemy maneuver, whether on land or at sea.

It was at the Battle of Alam Halfa that the world had received what was, up to that time, the most significant single demonstration of airpower’s impact on the land battle.

In the period Aug. 30-Sept. 4, 1942, RAF pilots bombed Rommel’s panzer army around the clock. Germany later calculated that 9,200 bombs hit its formations, destroying 170 support vehicles and damaging another 270.
B-25 bombers in formation fly during an attack that softened up Rommel’s forces in Africa.

Rommel complained that the air attacks “pinned my army to the ground.” Matthew Cooper, noted historian of the German Army, wrote that, after Alam Halfa, the prime panzer capabilities of speed, maneuver, and the rapid concentration of forces went out the window.

British forces in North Africa had, in the eastern sector, created a tidy set of command arrangements. Ground-force generals worked well with their air counterparts, a fact duly recognized by Rommel. At the second battle of El Alamein in October 1942, no less an authority than the Desert Fox himself conceded in his private diary: “The British command of the air was complete.”

When American forces landed in North Africa, they themselves got an opportunity to learn these employment lessons.

The proximate cause was Operation Torch. It was a brief campaign featuring a combined US-British invasion of German-held North Africa in the west. It ran from Nov. 8, 1942 to May 12, 1943 and eventually drew in more than 20 Allied and Axis ground divisions supported by strategic and tactical air forces.

The goal for Allied forces was simple: Drive eastward, defeat the enemy and link up with Montgomery’s Eighth Army, which broke through at El Alamein in October 1942 and was driving the Afrika Korps westward.


A Separate War

Eisenhower proposed a headlong Allied dash for Tunis in hopes of capturing that key capital city by December. From there, Allied forces were to cut off German supply routes and sea lines of communication and get ready for the next move—a thrust into Sicily and then the Italian mainland.

However, problems cropped up almost immediately. German aviation constantly denied the Allies local air superiority. The task of building airfields, difficult already, was slowed even more by the Luftwaffe’s harassing raids. Ramp space for dispersal was almost nonexistent.

Eisenhower in late November transferred his headquarters from Gibraltar to Algiers, and, soon, he gained a firsthand, up-close view of the air problem. In Algiers “the continuous din” of Luftwaffe night raids “made sleep impossible,” he later wrote in his memoirs.

The Allies strengthened the air defense of that city, but the Luftwaffe still bedeviled front-line troops. “Because of hostile domination of the air, travel anywhere in the forward area was an exciting business,” observed Ike. Troops complained to him, “Where is this bloody Air Force of ours?” The new supreme commander took it in stride, but resolved to take care of the problem.

“When the enemy has air superiority, the ground forces never hesitate to curse the ‘aviators,’” Eisenhower observed.

The experienced British smelled trouble right away. Tedder noted that “the US air [arm] was running a separate war,” meaning it was not flying in
support of the overall Allied operation. For example, one US force on Nov. 27 refused to assist Britain’s First Army, even though Eisenhower’s guidance mandated it. The US commander did not want to give up his airpower.

Meanwhile Tedder, when at all possible, was diverting RAF night fighters, Hurricanes, and even bombers away from action in the east to help out in the west. Still, handling competing claims was growing more difficult. US bomber forces in England watched uneasily as the desert air forces took priority for supplies. In Tedder’s words, “It was clear enough that the existing air organization was almost crazy, with two air forces but no effective command.”

A big part of the problem was that the United States Army’s FM 31-35 doctrine on airpower—written in April 1942—was almost criminally vague.

Historian Shawn P. Rife, in a 1998 article in Joint Force Quarterly, commented, “Contrary to popular belief, FM 31-35 did not prescribe that air units should be either assigned or attached to ground units.” The problem was that the doctrine said little at all, and served no one well. According to Rife, ground force commanders were disappointed that they did not “own” airplanes. Airmen worried about airpower being watered down. Distress was widespread.

On Dec. 1, 1942, Spaatz reported to North Africa to take command of US Army air assets. That move, however, did not resolve the overall problem of uniting all British and American air forces in the Mediterranean arc. By early December, Eisenhower was seeking more B-24s and B-17s to provide battlefield support to his forces in North Africa, even though they were kept busy attacking Rommel’s supply lines at Tripoli.

The Germans were chipping away at Allied air strength. On Dec. 6, 1942, German aircraft destroyed six RAF Spitfires on the ground. Other attacks claimed five American P-38s plus 11 light bombers.

The solution, the airmen knew, was to shift US and British air assets around the Mediterranean Theater on an almost daily basis. That kind of movement, however, required unified command and planning at Eisenhower’s supreme headquarters.

At the Casablanca Conference

Then-Lt. Gen. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, the Commanding General of US Army Air Forces, was in Washington, D.C., and favored unification, under a single command, of RAF and American assets, as did US and British commanders in North Africa. Tedder on Dec. 12 arrived at Eisenhower’s headquarters in Algiers for a conference. After a long talk, these two generals sketched out a unified command arrangement on the British model. “Think he is firmly hooked, but by no means landed,” Tedder reported to his boss in London.

It was at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943 that the door to lasting change swung open. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill reached a number of key decisions. One of them, on Jan. 26, established in the Mediterranean Theater one overall ground commander—British Gen. Harold Alexander—and one overall air commander, Tedder.

“From a headquarters in Algiers, Tedder was to command everything with wings between Gibraltar and Palestine, under the overall direction of Eisenhower,” wrote Tedder’s biographer, historian Vincent Orange.

Unfortunately, the change didn’t come into effect soon enough. While these new commanders were in the midst of taking up their positions, Rommel launched a last-chance attack.
that soon had US forces in a headlong retreat.

For three years the war in the desert had been a back and forth game of sweeping maneuver, retreat, and counterattack. When Montgomery captured Tripoli on Jan. 23, 1943, Rommel’s eastern supply route was blocked. The Germans still had capable forces in Tunisia. Rommel decided to counterattack and drive through to the northern coast at Bone, splitting the Allied front. Then he could fall back on old French defensive works and hold his sea lines indefinitely.

By early February 1943, though, the Americans had begun pressing in from the west. German commanders Jurgen von Armin and Rommel awaited them with their backs to the sea at Tunis in the north and Sfax in the south. However, the American operations had given the Desert Fox a tempting target. He noted with great interest that the US Army’s overextended lines spilled out in a 250-mile semicircle.

Rommel struck. German forces on Feb. 14 attacked the town Sidi Bou Zid, sending the American forces scurrying backward toward the mountain passes in a disordered retreat, equipment strewn in their wake. A main forward air base at Thelepte, which once had 124 fighters, came under attack and was evacuated on Feb. 17. The last P-39s took off at 10:30 a.m. Then, the US forces dug in on the mountain passes and roads and waited.

RAF Air Marshal Arthur Coningham, designated overall tactical air commander, arrived on Feb. 17 and found the US airmen in the equivalent of a defensive crouch. Some fighters and bombers hadn’t even been tasked, even though Rommel’s forces presented plenty of targets.

Worse was to come, and the site was the Kasserine Pass, a muddy main road through the mountains. The Americans had battened down to hold it at all costs. However, they failed. On Feb. 19, Rommel personally led the 10th Panzer Division in an armored attack on American lines, seeking to break through. That thrust fell short, but the next one did not. The German assault on Feb. 20 crushed organized resistance and opened the floodgates to a westward move.

The Final Spur

As the situation deteriorated, airmen could do little to help. Most aircraft were grounded either by dust storms or inept management by local ground commanders. In one appalling case, B-17s got lost and bombed an RAF base 90 miles away, killing several British airmen and Tunisians. By dawn on Feb. 21, Rommel’s forces held both sides of the Kasserine Pass.

Elsewhere, Rommel’s position was not as good. British and American delaying actions had already stopped the right prong of his advance. Tougher resistance changed the tempo during the day on Feb. 22, and by evening, artillery reinforcements had arrived. Under Coningham’s guidance, air attacks resumed on Feb. 22 and Feb. 23. A-20s hunted for targets. P-38s strafed Rommel’s forces crowded in the passes.

Rommel’s forces now found that they were exposed to air attacks. This was a lesson already learned many times by commanders at all levels in North Africa. Armored forces that were bunched together or arrayed on open plains could be picked off by fighters and bombers—as long as those aircraft were not leashed to ground units.

Time finally ran out on Rommel, and he methodically pulled back his forces.

US Brig. Gen. Elwood R. “Pete” Quesada, who was then a deputy in the coastal command, credited Coningham with bringing order out of chaos. It was Coningham who, in Quesada’s words, “overcame the concept of using the air force as artillery” and “established the doctrine that, if an airman is left to use his own weapon and use his experience, he would further the cause of the Army or the ground battle.”

Coningham’s authority, clearly established in the system created by Eisenhower, freed airmen from control of the US Army’s II Corps, which was dominated by ground officers. According to future Gen. William Momyer, who served in the North African campaign, II Corps had “very little understanding of the importance of air superiority,” and it had showed.

For many hours during the clash at Kasserine Pass, Eisenhower stared at his map, trying to take stock of things. He first assigned blame to himself for not knowing when danger passed, Eisenhower then assigned blame to himself for not knowing when to slow the headlong plunge toward Tunis. He then cited failures in intelligence and organization.

On the latter score, Kasserine was the final spur to releasing airpower to operate at peak efficiency. All air forces were forthwith integrated under Tedder. Spaatz controlled the Northwest African Air Force with its fighter, bomber, and coastal missions. Meanwhile, Alexander took control of the ground forces.

In today’s parlance, Tedder and Alexander would be called “combined force air component commander” and “combined force land component commander,” respectively.
With these posts in place, Eisenhower had a much better command setup. Ike expeditiously fired the II Corps commanding general, Maj. Gen. Lloyd R. Fredendall, who was viewed as neither likeable nor competent. On March 6, 1943, he was relieved by Patton, now a lieutenant general.

In conversations with his boss, Marshall, Eisenhower admitted he had made a serious mistake at Kasserine. The problem began, he said, with “the initial decision not to unify our air forces under a single command.” Now, the command arrangement was fixed. He also told Marshall that Tedder and Spaatz, together, “accomplished a practical perfection in the coordinated employment of the air forces of the two nations.”

Tedder was still apprehensive, though. In late February 1943, he wrote to his boss that, for Americans, it was “difficult to understand that every general has not a divine right to command his own private air forces, and, incidentally, a divine inspiration by which he knows better than anyone else how those air forces should be employed.”

Back in Washington, a doctrine fix got under way quickly. Brig. Gen. Laurence S. Kuter had left the Northwest Africa force for the Pentagon staff. In three weeks, Kuter and a small team had thoroughly revamped the Army’s air doctrine. Their product was War Department Field Manual 100-20. It declared, “The inherent flexibility of airpower is its greatest asset.” Moreover, it said in a key passage, “Control of available airpower 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 exploited.”

In FM 100-20, the institutional Army formally “rejected the principle of organic control of tactical air assets by stating that control of available airpower must be centralized to realize the maximum benefits,” commented Lt. Gen. John W. Pauly in a 1976 article in Air University Review. “This represented a complete turnaround in official Army doctrine and helped pave the way for a separate Air Force.” In Washington, the new field manual was viewed as airpower’s “declaration of independence.”

Not everyone liked it, of course. According to doctrine historian Robert F. Futrell, one critic complained that the US airmen had “swallowed the RAF solution of a local situation in Africa hook, line, and sinker.”

Whatever they swallowed, the medicine worked. FM 100-20 went well beyond North Africa. It endorsed concepts such as strategic attack on an enemy nation.

Indeed, for the rest of World War II, Eisenhower could always refer to the North Africa experience and use its lessons to keep his air and ground commanders working in unity. When confusion threatened in the hectic days after the 1944 Normandy landings, part of Eisenhower’s solution was to send Tedder, his deputy, to spend time with Montgomery at his headquarters in France and smooth out command arrangements. In France, Quesada and the US Army ground commander, Lt. Gen. Omar N. Bradley, kept in close coordination by sharing a trailer.

Making airpower equal took more than a change in doctrine. If there was an undisputed lesson from North Africa, it was that personal relationships were also key to effective command and employment of airpower. Overcoming what Tedder called the Army instinct toward a “divine right” to control airplanes also depended on trust among commanders. Airmen had to help ground commanders understand what made airpower work.

The education of ground commanders is an ongoing task. However strong the doctrine, however stark the battle results, truly effective airpower fulfills its potential only as a result of that elusive condition of mutual understanding among the units engaged in combined-arms warfare.