In numerous campaigns and wars, airpower turned out to be the “force of decision.”

A Short History of “Decisiveness”

By Phillip S. Meilinger

Field Manual 3-0, the Army’s keystone doctrine document, declares, “The Army’s primary purpose is deterrence, and should deterrence fail, decisively winning the nation’s wars.” It will do this “by fighting within an interdependent joint team.”

Any airman making such a claim—that airpower might be “decisive” in war—would be roundly chastised or, at minimum, be accused of parochial thinking. Yet military airpower has often been decisive in war.

The term “decisive” does not mean one service achieves victory itself. Airpower has seldom achieved victory independent of surface forces. It is equally difficult to list any recent campaign in which land or sea power achieved victory without airpower.

It is more useful to examine the political and military objectives and then determine airpower’s role in achieving them. Viewed in that light, airpower is seen as having a unique power to deter, detect, deliver, defend, deny, and destroy—and it has performed these missions with great success for decades.

EARLY DECADES

Airpower’s unique ability to strike hard and fast has been demonstrated many times. Today, political considerations dictate that the US project power quickly and precisely, with low risk of collateral damage or civilian casualties. What follows is a brief chronology of campaigns and wars where airpower played a particularly vital—and decisive—role.

In 1914, as the German Army moved on Paris, French and British reconnaissance aircraft noted a gap developing between the German First and Second Armies. The British Expeditionary Force moved into this gap, halting the German advance and disrupting Germany’s strategic war plan irrevocably. The resulting Battle of the Marne saved Paris and probably France.

After the war, the Royal Air Force policed British colonies in the Middle East and Africa in lieu of expensive ground forces. These colonial policing operations saved thousands of lives and millions of pounds sterling, while also being successful in maintaining order throughout many areas of the British Empire.

WORLD WAR II

In 1940, the Battle of Britain was a watershed event for airpower. It proved that whoever controls the air also controls the ground and sea beneath it. If Germany had achieved air superiority over the English Channel, Britain could not have
prevented an invasion. Given the strength of the Nazi Wehrmacht, this would have inevitably led to British defeat, leaving the US unable to intervene effectively in the war. There has seldom been a clearer example of airpower’s importance to the outcome of a major war.

The following year, when the Germans assaulted Crete, the British rushed to defend the island with the Royal Navy. In the ensuing battle, the Luftwaffe sank three British cruisers and eight destroyers; severely damaged two battleships, an aircraft carrier, and seven more cruisers; and sank two dozen smaller vessels. It was Britain’s worst naval defeat of the war. German paratroopers then captured the strategic island that dominated the sea-lanes in the eastern Mediterranean for the remainder of the war.

From 1941 to 1943, the Battle of the Atlantic was another campaign of enormous significance in the European Theater of World War II. German U-boats came close to severing the vital sea-lanes between Britain and the US. Long-range aircraft, especially B-24s, were instrumental in locating and defeating German submarines. Most of the U-boats destroyed during the war were sunk by airpower. In addition, aircraft sank nearly 900 enemy merchant ships, while less than 200 were sunk by Allied submarines and surface ships.

In the 1943 European campaign, the Italian island of Pantelleria—a stronghold in the Mediterranean Sea between Africa and Sicily—surrendered solely as a result of Allied bombing. The island was then used as an Allied air base and stepping stone for the invasion of Sicily.

The 1944-45 Battle of the Bulge achieved notable success for the Germans during its first week, due largely to surprise and also heavy winter weather that grounded Allied airpower. When the weather lifted, however, American airpower halted the German offensive, prevented reinforcement and resupply, and then turned the Germans back. Field Marshal Karl R. Gerd von Rundstedt ruefully noted the key role played by airpower in defeating his offensive.

**OVER NORMANDY**

The February 1944 air campaign made the invasion of Normandy possible, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower later stated. The “Big Week” had broken the back of the Luftwaffe and provided the needed air superiority over the beachhead.

On June 6, 1944, the Allies flew more than 12,000 sorties over the French coast while protecting the invasion forces below. The Luftwaffe mustered less than 100 sorties that day.

After the July 1944 breakout from Normandy, Lt. Gen. George S. Patton’s Third Army raced across France using Brig. Gen. Otto P. Weyland’s XIX Tactical Air Command as his southern flank. Weyland used his fighter-bombers to keep German forces at least 30 miles from the Third’s vulnerable flank. This was one of the most successful examples of air-ground maneuver in history. In one case, a German army of 20,000 men surrendered as a result of constant air attack—Maj. Gen. Eric Elster insisted upon surrendering personally to the airman who had brought about his defeat.

**COMBINED BOMBER OFFENSIVE**

The combined air offensive, from 1943 to 1944, deserves a book in itself and has raised great controversy ever since.

What cannot be disputed is that all German economic indicators—the production of steel, oil, electric power, chemicals, armaments, etc.—dropped precipitously from mid-1944 on, just as the Allied bomb tonnage began rising dramatically. It is crucial to recall that 72 percent of all Allied bombs falling on Germany were dropped after July 1, 1944. Long before Allied ground forces ever set foot on German soil, the enemy’s economy had collapsed.

**THE PACIFIC WAR**

On Dec. 7, 1941, carrier-based airpower was the deciding factor in the Japanese attack on US forces around Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. By the end of the day, four US battleships had sunk and four others were severely damaged. The US Pacific Fleet was decimated and would be unable to mount offensive operations for months thereafter.

Three days later, the Royal Navy’s _Prince of Wales_ and _Repulse_ made the blunder of venturing into open water without air cover. They were quickly sunk by Japanese aircraft off the Malayan coast, leaving the British with no capital ships in the Pacific—a loss that hamstrung British strategy for the next three years.

In June 1942, in one of the great air battles of the Pacific war, American aircraft from all services attacked the Japanese fleet as it moved toward the island of Midway. In this battle, where the enemy fleets never saw each other, the Japanese lost four of their six large aircraft carriers; the US lost one. The remainder of the Japanese invasion fleet turned back, and with it ended Japanese expansion in the Pacific.

Beginning in August 1942, air interdiction operations were essential in isolating the island of Guadalcanal, disrupting Japanese resupply efforts, and ensuring Allied success in this, the first US offensive campaign in the Pacific Theater.

In 1943, Fifth Air Force interdiction operations were similarly effective in the New Guinea campaign. Japanese resupply convoys were virtually halted, thereby isolating the
theater and helping Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s island-hopping strategy to be successful.

In the Pacific in 1945, mines laid by B-29s of the Twentieth Air Force sank 95 percent of all Japanese ships lost to mines during the war. This staggering total meant the paralysis of Japanese water-borne movement in the Inland Sea.

The continuing US strategic bombing campaign, culminating in the atomic strikes against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, brought about Japanese surrender prior to an invasion. During his radio address to the Japanese people on Aug. 14, 1945, Emperor Hirohito was clear in recognizing the role of the atomic bombs in his decision to surrender. Although casualty projections for the scheduled land invasions are debatable, the atomic strikes undoubtedly saved hundreds of thousands of Allied lives, as well as millions of Japanese lives, both military and civilian.

EARLY COLD WAR

The 1948 Berlin Airlift was perhaps the West’s greatest victory of the Cold War, a period in which airpower was repeatedly proved decisive. After the Soviets blockaded Berlin and forbade all land traffic, Allied airpower was able to keep West Berliners provisioned with food and fuel for 15 months. Airpower was shown to be a powerful tool of peaceful diplomacy. The entire world, but especially Germany, saw the West was attempting to save Berlin and its citizens, while the Soviets were trying to destroy them.

In the Korean War, Gen. Douglas MacArthur and several of his top ground commanders stated that airpower prevented North Korean forces from pushing them off the Korean peninsula. The interdiction campaign waged against North Korean forces and their supply lines stretching back into the north was one of the most effective in history. From 1952 to 1953, the air superiority campaign in “MiG Alley” was, like the Battle of Britain, of enormous significance. Had the United Nations lost air superiority, the massive Chinese ground forces supported by airpower would have wreaked havoc on UN forces stalemated near the 38th parallel. The MiG Alley battles, in which the US Air Force compiled a victory ratio of 10-to-one, were instrumental in preventing a Communist victory and preserving South Korean independence.

In 1961, the Cuban Air Force was tiny, but it was enough to ensure air superiority over the beaches at the Bay of Pigs. Without air cover, American-supported Cuban forces attempting to retake their country were destroyed, and Fidel Castro’s Communist regime clung to power.

MIDEAST TO VIETNAM AND BACK

In 1967, Israel put on one of the most effective air campaigns in history. The Israeli Air Force destroyed the Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian Air Forces, wiping out some 400 aircraft in one day. This air supremacy, which extended over the ground battlefields, paved the way for an overwhelming Israeli victory in the Six Day War.

In Vietnam in 1968, US airpower destroyed two divisions of North Vietnamese troops besieging the American firebase at Khe Sanh. At the same time, airlift kept the base well-supplied and reinforced. (This battle was a stark contrast to the situation at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, when French forces, lacking sufficient airpower, were overrun by the Viet Minh, essentially ending French involvement in Southeast Asia.)

Toward the war’s end in 1972, Linebacker I was instrumental in preventing South Vietnam from being overrun during the Easter Offensive. Since American ground forces had already been withdrawn and the South Vietnamese Army was not strong enough to hold, American airpower was essential in blunting the invasion. It must be remembered that the only difference between victory in 1972 and the South Vietnamese defeat in 1975 was the presence of American airpower during the first invasion from the north and the lack of that airpower in the latter invasion.

Linebacker II’s goal at the end of 1972 was to bring the North Vietnamese back to the negotiating table for serious discussions, while at the same time reassuring the South Vietnamese government of American resolve. Although success was short-lived and Saigon fell less than three years later, it is nonetheless true that peace accords were signed within weeks of the Linebacker II air offensive and American prisoners of war were released soon after. Airpower achieved President Nixon’s limited objectives.

The next year, in a massive airlift termed Operation Nickel Grass, the US Air Force moved more than 22,000 tons of critical supplies to Israel during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Munitions and spare aircraft parts were especially crucial to Israeli survival.

SMALL WARS OF THE 1980s

In June 1981, a daring strike by Israeli aircraft on the Osirak nuclear reactor just south of Baghdad set back Iraqi nuclear weapons development. Operation Desert Storm, less than a
decade later, would have been a much more dangerous event had Saddam Hussein possessed nuclear weapons.

The year 1982 was a big one for airpower. British success in the Falklands would have been impossible without land- and sea-based airpower. Raids by Vulcan bombers on the Port Stanley airfield caused the Argentines to reposition fighter aircraft to defend Buenos Aires, thus limiting the effectiveness of Argentina’s air force over the Falklands and contributing to the British victory.

Later that year, the Israeli Air Force routed its Syrian counterpart in the Bekaa Valley War, running up an air-to-air kill ratio that may have been as lopsided as 85-to-zero. Israeli F-15s and F-16s proved vastly superior to their Soviet-built counterparts and gave Israel air superiority for its invasion of southern Lebanon.

In 1986, Operation El Dorado Canyon’s political objective was to convince Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi to cease his support for anti-US terrorists in the wake of an attack on a Berlin nightclub that killed two Americans. Although less than two dozen aircraft actually delivered ordnance, airpower achieved President Reagan’s political objectives.

Airpower’s major role in the 1989 operation to oust Manuel Noriega from power in Panama came largely through airlift and tanker support. The war-opening F-117 strike may have generated headlines and controversy, but close air support, gunship, and jamming operations were also important factors in the US success.

1990s VICTORIES

Operation Desert Storm, in 1991, was one of the most decisive military victories in modern times. For six weeks, a coalition led by the US pummeled the Iraqi forces at strategic and tactical levels. When major ground operations finally began, US Central Command and CIA analysts determined that all Iraqi front-line divisions had already been rendered combat ineffective by coalition airpower. As former USAF Chief of Staff Gen. Merrill A. McPeak stated, it was the first time in history a field army had been defeated by airpower.

From 1991 through 2003, the coalition decided not to occupy Iraqi territory. Instead, airpower was used to prevent Iraqi aircraft from flying in certain areas and to prevent Iraqi ground forces from deploying in a threatening manner close to the Saudi border. These operations, Northern Watch and Southern Watch, were amazingly successful. Despite repeated attempts by Iraqi air defenses to disrupt these “air control” operations, the coalition flew more than 300,000 sorties over 12 years with no combat losses. More importantly, Iraq was contained—it was unable to build weapons of mass destruction or threaten her neighbors.

For 25 days in 1995, airpower conducted a scrupulously precise and effective air campaign, Operation Deliberate Force. After Josip Broz Tito had died in 1980, Yugoslavia—composed of a number of disparate ethnic groups—began to splinter. In 1995, factions in Bosnia took up arms against one another. One faction, supported by Serbia, shelled civilian targets in Sarajevo, prompting NATO air forces to intervene. Deliberate Force brought warring factions to the negotiating table at Dayton, Ohio, after which Bosnia obtained its freedom and peace.

By 1998, another former Yugoslavian province began agitating for more autonomy. This was Kosovo. Serbia, under the leadership of Slobodan Milosevic, intervened to prevent Kosovo’s secession by forcibly deporting hundreds of thousands of ethnic Kosovars from their land. Once again NATO acted, and as with Bosnia, it was decided ground forces would not be used for fear of escalation of bloodshed. Instead, airpower was used to decimate the Serbian forces in Kosovo while also taking down key industrial targets throughout Serbia itself. After 78 days of relentless yet precise Operation Allied Force air strikes, Milosevic capitulated. The Kosovars who had been driven from their homes were able to return, and Kosovo gained its autonomy.

AFTER SEPT. 11

Following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the US and a coalition of allies attacked Afghanistan—home to the al Qaeda terrorist organization that had orchestrated the attacks against New York and the Pentagon. Airpower, supported by special operations forces and indigenous Afghan units, brought the Taliban government that supported al Qaeda to its knees. Afghanistan’s capital, Kabul, was liberated by Northern Alliance forces before US conventional ground forces had even entered the country. This stunning military victory was achieved without a single aircraft lost to enemy action.

By 2003, Saddam Hussein’s continued defiance of United Nations sanctions finally brought action. The US, backed by UN resolutions, attacked Iraq with the intention of bringing down Saddam’s regime and installing a democratic government in Baghdad. Once again, airpower played a key role, necessitating far fewer coalition ground troops than had been used in Desert Storm. In northern Iraq, conventional ground troops were barely used, due to the refusal of Turkey to allow operations from its soil. Instead, airpower and a handful of special operations forces, an airborne brigade, and indigenous Kurdish forces neutralized 11 Iraqi divisions. Baghdad fell, and the regime was toppled with the loss of only one aircraft and less than 150 coalition combat deaths.

Airpower will not be decisive in all wars or in all circumstances, but neither will traditional surface forces. The events of the past several decades indicate airpower can be extremely decisive in a variety of situations due to its ability to react quickly, precisely, and with discrimination to help achieve political and military objectives. Those who claim airpower is not decisive simply haven’t been paying attention.

Phillip S. Meilinger is a retired Air Force pilot with 30 years’ service and a Ph.D. in military history from the University of Michigan. He is the author of seven books and more than 80 articles on military affairs. His latest book is Hubert R. Harmon: Airman, Officer, and Father of the Air Force Academy. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, “The Question of What to Target,” appeared in the June issue.