



2014–015

Christopher M. Rein, *The North African Air Campaign: U.S. Army Air Forces from El Alamein to Salerno*. Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2012. Pp. x, 290. ISBN 978-0-7006-1878-1.

Review by Christopher Koontz, US Air Force Historical Studies Office (christopher.koontz.civ@mail.mil).

Recent scholarship¹ has challenged the once prevalent depiction of the Allied effort in the Mediterranean theater as a sideshow that diverted resources from the coming invasion of continental Europe. In fact, the new thinking goes, the campaigns in North Africa and Italy enabled American armed forces to gain combat experience, identify their best fighting leaders, and acquire expertise in combined operations with their British allies. In *The North African Air Campaign*, Christopher Rein (US Air Force Academy) provides an excellent and welcome study of the contributions of the Army Air Force (AAF) to the war in the Mediterranean. He argues that, in contrast to the early struggles faced by US ground forces in theater, for example, at Kasserine Pass, the AAF waged “a model air campaign” (3), while effectively applying its doctrine, equipment, and personnel to achieve operational objectives.

Rein begins with a discussion of the AAF’s intellectual and organizational development before the Second World War. Despite its leaders’ preference for strategic bombing as a means to bring about victory, the AAF was “initially assigned to, and best equipped to execute, an operational campaign” of close air support, reconnaissance, airlift, and, most crucially, interdiction and isolation of the battlefield (10–11). Although much effort had been expended on doctrine and plans for strategic bombing, the AAF had also developed a field manual for close air support (FM 31–35), which remained essentially unchanged throughout the conflict. It also designed and fielded aircraft suited for ground attack and trained sufficient pilots for the war in North Africa. Rein devotes considerable attention to the dispute between the official historians of the Army and the newly independent postwar Air Force over whether the AAF had neglected tactical air support in favor of strategic bombing. He judiciously concludes that bias on both sides has obscured the real lessons of the North African air campaign and offers a compelling alternative interpretation of it.

Between June and November 1942, the AAF flew as a junior partner to its British allies in North Africa. It had little effect upon the Battle of El Alamein and the pursuit of Erwin Rommel’s forces across Libya; its operations revealed shortcomings in intelligence and logistical capabilities. But, Rein argues, the Americans’ observation of “the successful British method of employing tactical airpower and the demands of an operational campaign” (37–39) led them to commit heavy bombers to strike enemy shipping and logistical targets rather than conduct costly and unproductive strategic attacks like the first raid on the oil refineries at Ploesti, Romania (June 1942). The Army strengthened the Ninth and Twelfth Air Forces, diverting assets away from the growing Eighth Air Force in England; this “enabled the Allies to further attrite German air and ground strength” in North Africa, resulting in “the strongest possible contribution to winning the war” (67).

Rein covers the air war in Tunisia and Sicily, and the massive second strike against Ploesti (1 August 1943). The latter yielded only meager results and endangered the subsequent landings at Salerno by sapping the AAF’s ability to undertake the sort of varied missions it had so capably handled in North Africa (168, 183–84). Critically, the AAF could not replicate its earlier successes during the Italian Campaign for several reasons—the terrain favored defense and the Allies reassigned most of their best field and air commanders to support the build-up for Operation Overlord in Normandy. Further, Rein points out, the AAF segregated strategic and tactical missions from an organizational perspective, dedicating numbered Air Forces to each mission. This left fewer heavy bombers and escort fighters for the ground support and interdiction missions

1. E.g., Rick Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942–1943* (NY: Henry Holt, 2003), and Douglas Porch, *The Path to Victory: The Mediterranean Theater in World War II* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004).

that had been so successful earlier (193–94). This decision had long-lasting effects on the Air Force and its force structure after the war.

Previous histories of the Mediterranean theater of operations have concentrated on close air support by fighters and twin-engine bombers; this reflects parochial disputes between the Army and the postwar Air Force. By contrast, Rein insists that “the four-engine B-17 *Flying Fortress* was undoubtedly the star of the North African Campaign” (214), because it could support both battlefield and theater-level interdiction missions. He marshals compelling evidence that the AAF’s heavy bombers in North Africa were “properly employed” and more effective than their Eighth Air Force counterparts (132).

Rein’s account, written in clear and concise prose (apart from lapses into military jargon in the conclusion), draws on an impressive array of relevant primary sources, including records at the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and the Air Force Historical Research Agency, as well as the papers of major commanders and other important figures at libraries and other repositories throughout the United States. He also makes astute, appropriately critical use of the postwar official histories of the US armed services. Many maps from official Army, Air Force, and Navy sources provide valuable geographic context for the narrative. A surprisingly large number of photographs go well beyond those which usually accompany texts on the subject. Finally, there are two helpful appendices. The first lists aircraft used by the AAF in North Africa, with commentary on their specific characteristics and performance in the theater. The second provides air orders of battle for both Allied and Axis forces from El Alamein through the conquest of Tunisia. One wishes this had been extended through the Sicilian campaign, but this is a minor complaint.

In sum, Christopher Rein gives readers a valuable new perspective on the first major campaign of the Army Air Force in World War II. It will enlighten both students of military history in general and specialist historians of the campaign in the Mediterranean theater.²

2. The views expressed in this review do not reflect those of the US Government, the Department of Defense, or the Department of the Air Force.