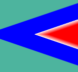
Cutting through the Political Jungle:

Eisenhower and Tedder

as allies and friends, 1942-1945



In July 1938, Air Marshal Sir Wilfrid Freeman, head of research and development in the Air Ministry, had Arthur Tedder appointed to a position in that ministry specially created for him: Director-General of Research and Development. During the next 28 critical months, until December 1940, he and Freeman worked with managing directors, chief designers and senior trade union officials of aircraft companies and their suppliers to provide Britain with weapons capable of resisting the Luftwaffe and, one day perhaps, doing some damage to Germany.

Their task was complicated by a revolution during the 1930s in the design, construction, equipment and production of aircraft. A further complication came in May 1940 when the entire aviation business was detached from the Air Ministry and made part of a new Ministry of Aircraft Production under the control of Lord Beaverbrook, a close friend of Britain's new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. Beaverbrook, a newspaper magnate entirely ignorant of aviation, supposed that improvisation gave better results than organisation; set unrealistic targets as opposed to making rational plans; and preferred exhortation to argument, threats to persuasion.

Consequently, Tedder became desperate to escape and Freeman, who had himself returned to the Air Ministry as Vice-Chief of the Air Staff, supported a request in November 1940 from Arthur Longmore, head of Middle East Command in Cairo, for Tedder to be appointed his Deputy. Six months later, in May 1941, Longmore was fired and Tedder took his place.

Long before he arrived in Cairo, Tedder clearly understood, as a result of his daily work as Director-General of Research and Development, that neither Britain's aircraft industry nor her merchant fleet could supply him with sufficient weapons to overcome Axis power on land, at sea or in the air. American aircraft were essential and therefore good relations with Americans were essential. American ships, tanks, trucks and soldiers would become equally essential, once the 'Allies' moved onto the offensive in the Mediterranean and still more so if the war were ever to be carried into the Nazi heartland.

These humiliating facts did not please Tedder – why should they? – but his claim to greatness (and I believe that he *was* a great commander, both in war and peace) lies precisely in his readiness to accept them. Better still, to accept them wholeheartedly, with a cheerful face, not with a resigned sigh, and thereafter take advantage of the goodwill thus generated (Americans being a notoriously generous people). Many of Tedder's countrymen, in and out of uniform, refused either to accept American superiority in material or manpower, or did so grudgingly. Worse still, they assigned to themselves a compensating *moral* superiority; casting themselves as British Greeks to American Romans in a play that has always bombed on this side of the Atlantic.

But from December 1940, when Tedder became an operational commander in Egypt (and no longer a constantly-harried ministry official in Britain, to his delighted surprise and relief) until the day he died, Tedder remained acutely aware that the actual relations between the United States and Britain were those of master and man, although both sides might like to pretend – and even to persuade themselves – that they really were equal partners, if not loving blood brothers.

Success in the Desert War, achieved by November 1942, commended Tedder to an American general, Dwight David Eisenhower, newly-arrived in North-West Africa as Supreme Allied Commander, and to Carl Andrew Spaatz, head of American air forces there. By then, Tedder had earned one vital asset to offset Britain's shortage of material and manpower. That was *experience*. In general, experience of the amazing efforts a nation geared for total war could make in overcoming deficiencies of every kind. And in particular, experience of the practical management of air forces, in daylight and darkness, to compete for air superiority, to assist land or sea forces, and to bomb enemy bases and lines of communication.

By November 1942, before he met Eisenhower or Spaatz, Tedder also had a great deal of experience in dealing with Americans. Firstly, in the days before Pearl Harbor, many 'observers' passed through the Middle East and they sometimes offered advice on military operations (based on theory rather than practice) that caused him to swallow hard before replying; but swallow he did and then answered blandly with a warm smile.

Secondly, some diplomats in Cairo sent exaggerated reports about British problems to Washington in what Tedder called 'misdirected enthusiasm'. They were anxious to galvanise the American government into helping the British more urgently, but he was unable to restrain their enthusiasm (which he thought might prove counter-productive) because their reports were supposed to be secret. The Americans had yet to learn that secrets in Cairo became public knowledge in at most 24 hours.

Thirdly, of all the Americans with whom Tedder had dealings, before or after Pearl Harbor, those with representatives of Pan American Airways – which might be described in those days as a particularly aggressive, tightly-focused company – proved to be the trickiest. On this front, fortunately, he found loyal allies in the American military and, after a long and bitter fight, they triumphed and Pan Am was 'militarised' for the duration. Incidentally, this is one aspect of the Desert War which, as yet, has received very little attention.

And fourthly, American airmen came under Tedder's indirect command when General Lewis H. Brereton formed the 'Middle East Air Force' on 28 June 1942. With his usual sensitivity when Anglo-American relations were concerned, Tedder emphasised Brereton's independence and invited his co-operation. They got on famously because at that time they had much to offer each other. For example, American pilots were highly trained, but lacked operational expertise and there were not many of them; their aircraft provided a vital reinforcement, but they had as yet very few supporting ground crews. 'The Americans work in very well with our squadrons', reported Tedder to Portal (head of the RAF) on 22 October. 'They are learning from us, and we are learning from them – I was glad to hear this from both sides.' A few days later, he received the ultimate American accolade: an appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine, 9 November 1942, described as 'Tedder of North Africa' and, less respectfully, in the cover story as 'a pale, thin gremlin.'

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During 1943, Eisenhower, Tedder and Spaatz formed a triumvirate which did much to balance increasingly tense relations with Bernard Montgomery, an exceptional but single-minded British field commander. Montgomery became increasingly reluctant to discuss hopes and fears with fellow-commanders, preferring instead to declare his own intentions. As head of Mediterranean Air Command (from February 1943), Tedder recast Anglo-American air power into an effective shape, ending early setbacks in Tunisia and helping to bring about a complete victory there in May, followed by the conquest of Sicily in August and the invasion of Italy in September.

Americans respected Tedder for his achievements and liked him for his straightforward, unpompous manner. At this moment, the thought may be crossing your mind: 'Well yes, Tedder's biographer *would* say that. No doubt he has a whole bunch of pro-Tedder quotes in his files, but do they represent what Americans really thought of him?' To answer that question, I learned that many officers returning to the United States from duty in North Africa were interviewed in the Pentagon. No question of buttering up allies arises because neither they nor the press knew about these interviews and so their opinions have double value for me.

Three examples. Firstly, Major Frederick S. Wildman reported that everyone at Casablanca in January 1943 had been impressed by Tedder's 'warmth, his simplicity and, above all, his direct objective thinking and plain common sense. He hasn't any style or artificial dignity and could as easily be a fine character out of New England or Texas as out of Great Britain.'[1] Secondly, Lieutenant-Colonel C. V. Whitney – who worked with Tedder for nine months – emphasised his 'versatility, open-mindedness to suggestions, and his courage.' The courage Whitney had in mind was not, as you might suppose, in fighting against Germans and Italians, but 'in

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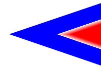


his stands and arguments with (British or American) Army commanders.'[2] And thirdly, General Elmer E. Adler regarded Tedder as 'a quiet type of man, especially well liked by all of his subordinates… He demonstrated beyond peradventure of doubt that even though the RAF is an independent organization it can support a Ground Army in battle.'[3]

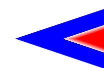
The strength of Tedder's commitment to Anglo-American public harmony (translated into an exalted ideal by Eisenhower) was never more clearly illustrated than in Tedder's instantaneous reaction against 'Mary' Coningham, his own greatly-admired field commander, when Coningham quarrelled with General Patton early in April 1943. Neither at the time, nor in his memoirs published in 1966, did Tedder recognise that in this quarrel Coningham was defending his *American* subordinates, 12th Air Support Command, against extravagant criticism. But Eisenhower, like Tedder, over-reacted badly. Spaatz and Kuter, who knew Patton, reacted calmly and Tedder was quite mistaken in supposing that his intervention on Patton's side converted that remarkable man into 'a friend of ours' who would thereafter become a loyal team-mate.

Tedder had been fortunate, as Roderic Owen (his first biographer) wrote, to find in Eisenhower 'a man of goodwill with a similar ability to cut through dense political jungles on the trail of a similar, simple idea.'[4] General Laurence S. Kuter, himself a very shrewd operator, thought Tedder was 'a politician of Eisenhower's stature. That's why they got along so well.'[5]

There was also the fact that Tedder's wife had been killed in January 1943 in an aircraft accident at Heliopolis airfield, near Cairo, while returning from a visit to RAF hospitals. His eldest son was also dead: a pilot, killed over Cherbourg in August 1940. These and other personal tragedies played a part in bringing Britons and Americans together. Late in February 1943, General Marshall became seriously concerned about the strength of anti-British sentiment in the Army and among American civilians. In a letter to his Public Relations chief he drew attention to the losses suffered by British commanders at all levels and required him to make these widely known.[6]

In April 1943, Tedder met Marie de Seton Black, younger daughter of a Scottish colonel, Sir Bruce Seton, and his wife Elma, who had been a pillar of British society in India. Marie (or rather 'Toppy' as she was always known) was then just 36 (Tedder was nearly 53). She was currently arranging a divorce and working for the Americans in Algiers as a welfare/liaison adviser. They fell as joyfully in love as any of us would hope to and Eisenhower – now 'Ike' – became their friend. They had drinks and meals together, with Kay Summersby (Ike's British-born driver) sometimes making a foursome with them. 'Ike just ragged the lives out of us', wrote Toppy to her mother in June, 'and I must say we both adored it for it meant a lot of laughing!' 'He is a dear, honest-to-God, straight, good man and a very good friend of ours.'

Toppy was the inspiration behind the Malcolm Clubs, founded for airmen in Algiers in July to honour the memory of a most gallant pilot: Wing Commander Hugh Malcolm. His was the only Victoria Cross awarded to an airman in the entire North African campaign. These clubs became Toppy's pride and joy and Tedder shared her enthusiasm wholeheartedly. Eisenhower also approved of her concern for welfare work and both men were able to relax in her cheerful company.



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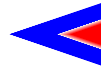
One September evening in Tunis they all played 'silly games', wrote Toppy, 'and I wondered just what people would say if they could see two such great men trying to float needles on water, bouncing teaspoons into glasses!!' Ike was 'best man, bridesmaid and witness' at their wedding in the British Consulate, Tunis, on 26 October 1943. The night before, Ike and Kay Summersby had called at Tedder's caravan for drinks. Both men 'behaved shockingly and acted like a couple of small boys, kept on asking *what* they had to do' next day. In May 1946 the Tedders had a son, Richard. Eisenhower agreed to be his godfather and kept in regular touch with Richard, at birthdays and Christmas, for the rest of his life. The friendship formed during these middle months of 1943 would make professional relations between Eisenhower and Tedder easier for the rest of the war.

Like Eisenhower, Tedder had acquired management skills and dealt efficiently both with correspondence and with visitors to his office. He could argue cogently, on paper or across a table; he could keep his temper in public no matter how provoked; he had the rare gift of brevity (in speech or writing); and greater than these admirable qualities, he knew when to keep his mouth shut. He often persuaded stubborn, strong-minded men to agree with him, or to let him have his way, or at least not to break with him: men who were as awkward to deal with as officers in the three services, journalists, politicians and government officials.

Eisenhower and Tedder were remarkably similar in their methods. 'I don't remember ever hearing a directive from Tedder', recalled Pete Quesada, a famous American airman, in 1950. 'Even when persuading you, he seldom worked on the actual point. He tried to influence people's minds and have *them* think straight rather than order their actions.'[7] Larry Kuter agreed. 'His manner of operating, said Kuter in 1950, 'was one of getting conflicting interests together and staying very much in the background. I remember meeting in the presence of Tedder and decisions forming which were more in the nature of a resolution of difficulties by mutual agreement in his presence.'[8]

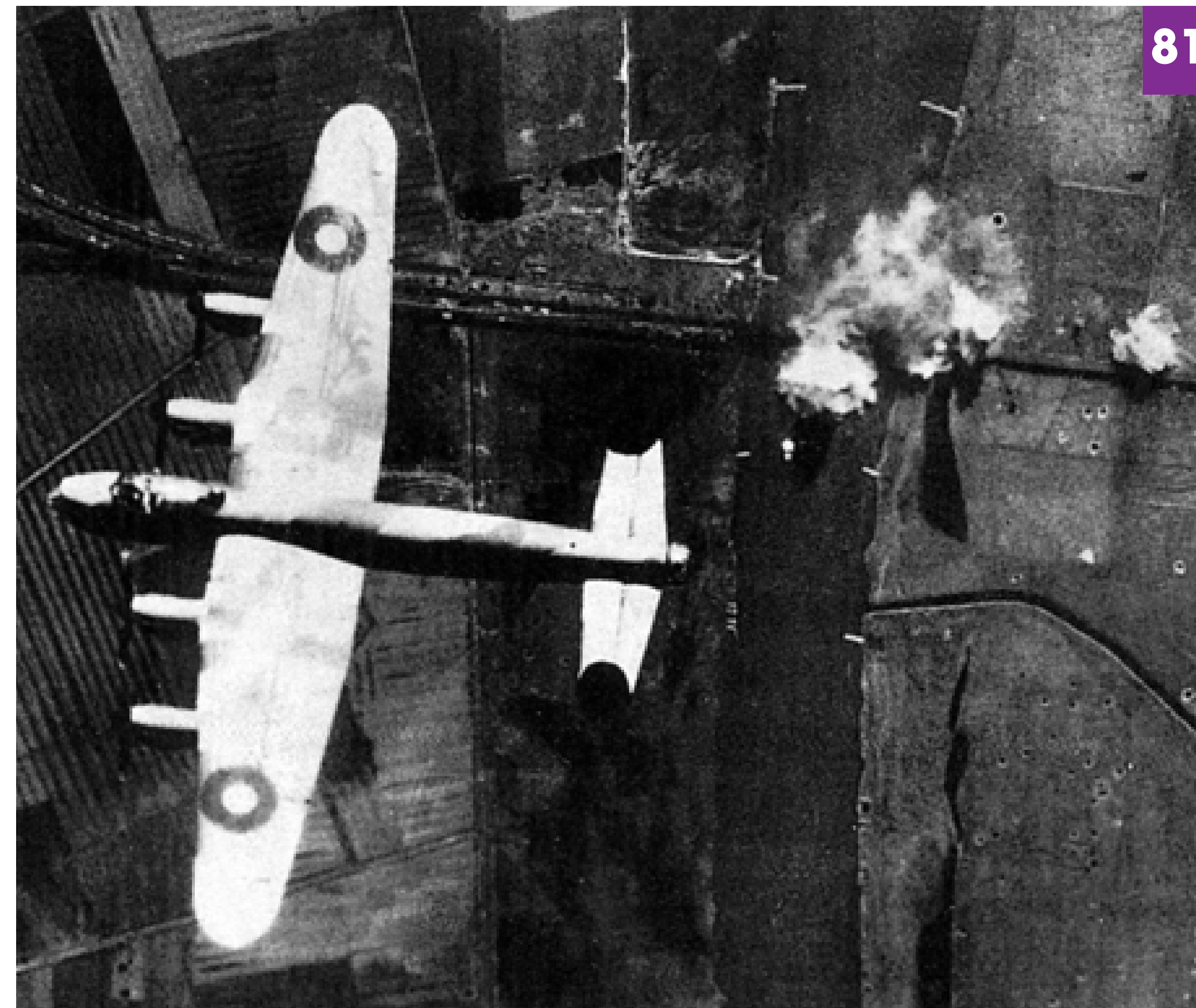
Adroit operators usually get their way, but both Eisenhower and Tedder were accused of taking too long about it, of being indecisive, of keeping options open, in a vain attempt to pacify every interested party, long after they should have been closed. Carl Spaatz made a perceptive criticism of Tedder while being interviewed by Dr Bruce Hopper, historian of the US Strategic Air Force, in June 1945: 'he would never put himself in a position where he had responsibility – but always authority.'[9] Perhaps the same criticism could be made of Eisenhower.



In December 1943, Tedder was appointed Eisenhower's Deputy for Operation 'Overlord', launched in June 1944 to liberate Occupied Europe and assist the Soviet Union to overthrow Hitler. Both before and after D-Day, there are many occasions when their methods angered opponents and exasperated friends. No issue generated more heat than the Transportation Plan and I would therefore like to use it as an example of Eisenhower and Tedder working together.

The question arose of how air power – specifically four-engined 'strategic' bombers – could best assist 'Overlord'. The British bomber commander, Arthur Harris, preferred to continue his destruction of German cities, hoping to win the war before the invasion could begin. Spaatz, who had left the Mediterranean Theatre with Eisenhower and Tedder to become the American bomber commander, wanted to employ his forces against Germany's aircraft and oil industries and the fighters defending them. Like Harris, Spaatz hoped that bombing would win the war without the need of a costly assault on defended beaches.

Tedder, supported by Eisenhower, successfully urged a prolonged, systematic attack on the numerous railways, roads, bridges, rivers and canals serving the invasion area, all the way from Normandy into Western Germany. It would be easy, he argued, for the Germans to move in reinforcements quickly – especially of heavy weapons such as tanks and artillery, together with ammunition, fuel, food and water – if they had the use of good communications. Therefore, if the Allies were not to be swept back into the sea shortly after D-Day, the German build-up must be delayed and disorganised. This 'isolation of the battlefield' impressed Eisenhower, who understood at once that it would greatly help Allied soldiers to secure a Normandy bridgehead and, equally vital, build up strength to enlarge it more quickly than the Germans could build up strength to eliminate it.



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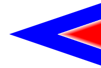
The military arguments were complicated by Prime Minister Churchill, who claimed to fear the political consequences if friendly civilians in France and Belgium suffered serious casualties. Churchill, who had a low opinion of Tedder, tried to win over Eisenhower. Finding no response, he appealed over Eisenhower's head to President Roosevelt. The President supported the field commanders, bluntly and promptly. By prior warning and careful targeting, Tedder hoped to reduce the civilian toll to a minimum.

The cruel fact remained, however, that even if his plan had been cancelled, *any* direct attempt to liberate western Europe from German rule must result in unbearable grief for many families as well as massive destruction to everything they loved or needed: their homes, shops, churches, public buildings, cultivated fields, animals, pastures, woodlands and streams. On the other hand, numerous civilians showed themselves ready to risk death, torture or deportation in order to help the plan: occasionally by direct attack upon railway lines or centres, more often by quiet sabotage, and most often by working slowly and poorly.[10] In fact, fewer than 5,000 civilians were killed. A grievous toll, but far below the worst estimates and many fewer than would be killed by ground fighting after D-Day.

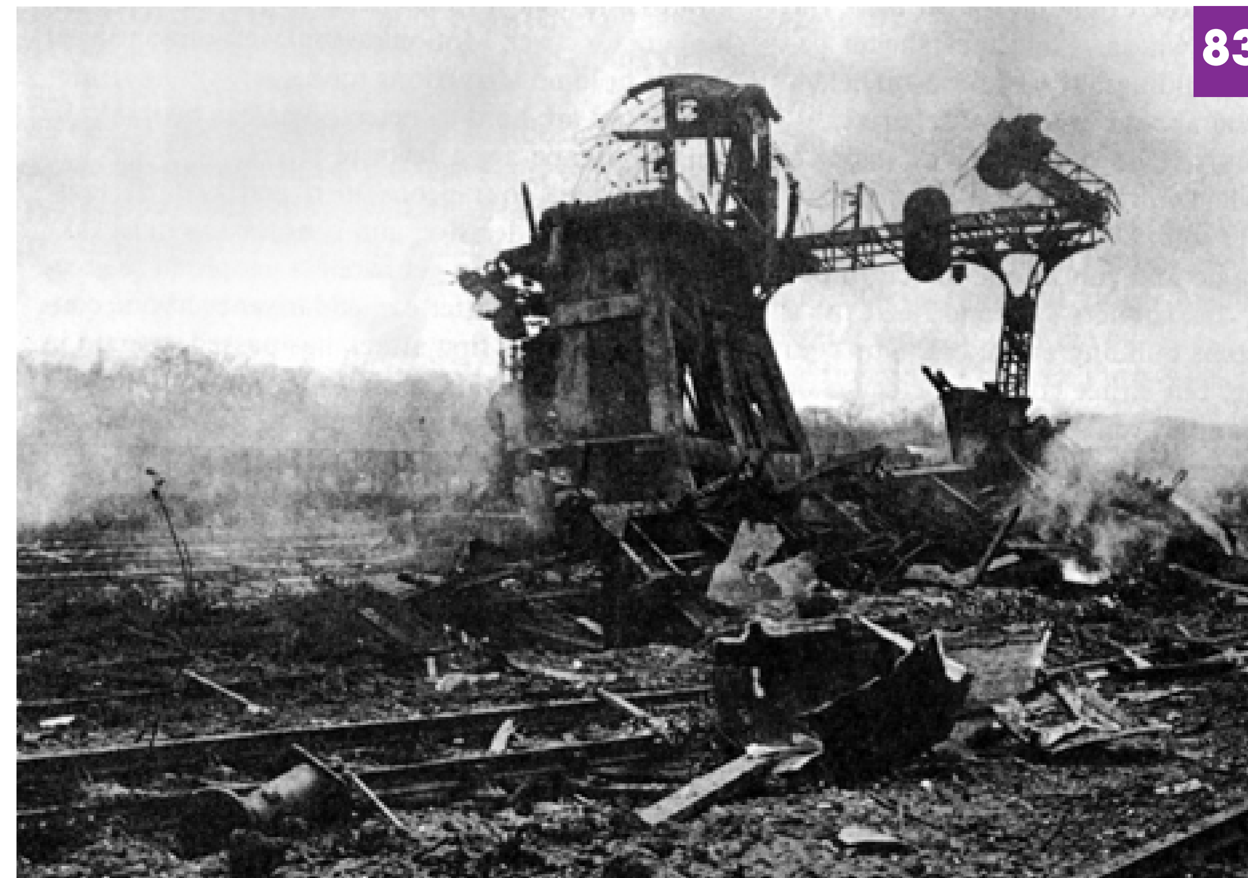
In advocating transport targets, Tedder was influenced by his knowledge of the success achieved by Allied bombers against such targets in Sicily and southern Italy and by the advice of British railway executives. The task of preparing a detailed Transportation Plan was assigned to Solly Zuckerman, Tedder's chief scientific adviser. They considered it the most effective means not only of safeguarding the Normandy landings, but also of helping soldiers to win the war, if the commanders of the strategic bombers would co-operate fully.

Spaatz and Harris, having accepted that an invasion *was* necessary, intended to support it with their heavy bombers only immediately before and after D-Day, but Tedder argued that to paralyse the enemy transport system would require maximum concentration for several weeks, at the expense of other targets: in Spaatz's case, the Luftwaffe (on the ground or in the air) and synthetic oil plants; in Harris's case, large urban areas.

At a meeting on 10 March 1944, Tedder agreed that the Luftwaffe should remain 'an absolute first priority', but was unconvinced by the oil plan. The targets, he told Portal, 'are in difficult areas (six of them in the Ruhr, where we have been assured that the Americans could not do precision bombing on railway targets because of flak and smoke, and the most important ones in the areas south and south-west of Berlin, where penetration is most difficult.' The arguments for and against transport or oil targets were nicely balanced, but Tedder prevailed because at a decisive meeting on 25 March Spaatz was unable to assure Eisenhower that his oil plan would give more direct help than the transport plan to troops going ashore on and after D-Day. The Combined Chiefs of Staff directed that control of the heavy bombers be handed over to Eisenhower and he assigned that task to Tedder.



Unfortunately, the debate upset many in 8th Air Force staff circles and they did little to implement the transportation plan. Most of the work, in fact, was done by the RAF's Bomber Command. But Tedder found it prudent not to press Spaatz. He knew that Spaatz thought the invasion might fail. As Alfred Mierzejewski wrote, Spaatz 'wanted to evade responsibility for that failure and hoped to wreck the German war economy himself through the use of air power alone and so win the war and the bombing debate and strengthen the Army Air Force's claim to organizational independence.'[11] Eisenhower also found it prudent not to press Spaatz. He respected Spaatz's judgment even more than he did Tedder's. After the breakout, Eisenhower was willing to give Spaatz his head. To restrain him would expose Eisenhower to the charge of favouring British commanders ahead of American commanders: a charge already being aired by some American soldiers (and newspapers) with regard to the intensely-unpopular British general, Bernard Montgomery.



German military strength, depended upon coal. Upon coal which could only be transported efficiently by railway networks. Upon railways networks which depended upon large, fixed and therefore vulnerable marshalling yards…

After the breakout, the Transportation Plan came to envisage the war-shortening advantage of paralysing Germany's industrial, commercial and agricultural life by inhibiting all movement. Raw materials are useless unless they can be moved to factories and the products of these factories must be moved elsewhere, given the dispersion increasingly forced upon German industry from 1942 onwards by Allied bombing raids. Only then can they be assembled, either into weapons or into something almost equally vital. Similarly, harvested crops are of little value unless they can be moved from where they are grown to where they are eaten. And synthetic oil, essential to Germany's military operations, cannot be produced without coal, which must be carried from where it is mined or stored to a refinery.

The inspiration for this plan did not come from *intelligence* sources, not even from Ultra intercepts, but from *information*, most of it not even classified. It was based, quite simply, on general knowledge supplemented by discussion with transport experts. In intelligent (including intelligence) circles, both military and civilian, it was no secret that Germany lacked natural oil and

therefore needed Romanian imports and synthetic oil plants. In such circles, who did not know that Germany industry, and consequently German military strength, depended upon coal? Upon coal which could only be transported efficiently by railway networks? Upon railways networks which depended upon large, fixed and therefore vulnerable marshalling yards, including the repair and servicing facilities found therein?[12]

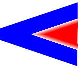
Nevertheless, both parts of the Transportation Plan – firstly to isolate the battlefield and secondly to paralyse the German economy – were bitterly opposed by intelligence agencies, British and American.[13] A dedicated Kremlin Watcher, trained in the good old Cold War days, might – just might – truly understand the complex compromise and savage rivalries which bound together the air commanders and their alleged masters in Whitehall and Washington.[14] The British Ministry of Economic Warfare, the American Enemy Objectives Unit, the planning and intelligence staffs of the British and American bomber commands, the Directorate of Bomber Operations in the Air Ministry and the Combined Strategic Targets Committee all took full advantage of this command jungle. They became more than advisers, presenting a balanced summary of facts and offering opinions based upon those facts. They saw themselves as equal (if not directing) partners in decision-making, advocating particular policies.

Walt Rostow, personally involved in the transport-oil controversy (of which he composed a persuasive analysis) explained that decisions were reached in an 'arena of power, vested interest, and personality where forces quite different from straightforward intellectual argument were at work.'[15]

Tedder, whom Zuckerman called 'the politically sensitive airman',[16] was as much at home in that arena as Eisenhower. Both men recognised, early in 1944, that centralised employment under a single director of the massive air power available to the Allies was politically impossible. A coherent organisation, acceptable to all the principal interests, service and civilian, could not be created. There were too many conflicting ambitions, energetically and cunningly pursued. Also, everyone in a high position was tired, worried and at times overwhelmed by numerous, urgent demands.

On 20 May 1945, Spaatz told Bruce Hopper that he would have served under Tedder as air commander for the Overlord campaign as willingly as he had in the Mediterranean campaign, but it was not to be. Fortunately, said Spaatz, Eisenhower, Tedder and he kept in such close touch 'that nothing could possibly go wrong, except in our own persons… It worked well enough to win the war, yes, but if one of the three had been struck by heart failure it might have worked so poorly as to lose the war… In other words, it was a lousy organisation.'[17] Eisenhower and Tedder knew that, and therefore relied on each other, on Spaatz and other enlightened individuals to make it work.

'I consider him one of the outstanding men I have met in this war', wrote Eisenhower of Tedder to Portal on 14 May 1945. 'He is selfless, keen of mind and absolutely loyal. His grasp of complicated problems, his strategic sense, and his intimate knowledge of all matters affecting the air arm, have been of inestimable value to me, and in my opinion, to his country and to the Allied cause. I have never been separated from him officially since early February 1943 and during all that period I have



counted myself extremely fortunate to have by my side a senior officer of such outstanding moral courage and extraordinary comprehension of all major problems with which I have had to deal.'[18]

NOTES

1 Pentagon interview, 5 April 1943: Bolling microfilm A.1274.
2 Pentagon interview, 6 April 1943; also in reel A.6008.
3 Pentagon interview, 25 March 1943: Bolling microfilm, A.1748.
4 Roderic Owen, *Tedder* (Collins, London, 1952) p. 180.
5 Interview with Kuter, September/October 1974, Bolling AFB, K239.0512-810, p. 284.
6 Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Organizer of Victory* (Viking Press, New York, 1973) p. 129.
7 Owen, p. 207.
8 Owen, p. 216.
9 Spaatz Papers, Library of Congress, Box 136.
10 M. R. D. Foot, *SOE: The Special Operations Executive, 1940-1946* (BBC Publications, London, 1984) p. 225.
11 Alfred C. Mierzejewski, *Wheels Must Roll For Victory: Allied Air Power and the German War Economy, 1944-45* (D.Phil dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1985) p. 96.
12 Alfred C. Mierzejewski, *The Collapse of the German War Economy, 1944-1945* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 1988).
13 W. W. Rostow, *Pre-Invasion Bombing Strategy: General Eisenhower's Decision of March 25, 1944* (University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981).
14 Richard G. Davis, 'RAF-AAF Higher Command Structures and Relationships, 1942-45' in *Air Power History*, vol. 38 (Summer 1991) pp. 20-28 offers a valuable guide through this morass. See also Carlo d'Este, *Decision in Normandy: The Unwritten Story of Montgomery and the Allied Campaign* (Collins, London, 1983) chapter 13.
15 Rostow, p. 43.
16 Lord Zuckerman, *Six Men Out of the Ordinary* (Peter Owen Publishers, London, 1992) p. 65.
17 Spaatz Papers, Library of Congress, Washington DC, Box 136.
18 Eisenhower Papers, Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas. 1916-52, Portal, Box 93.

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