

AIR POWER

AND THE BATTLE FOR NORMANDY

WORDS JAMES HOLLAND

Operation Overlord was only possible once total air superiority over northern France had been achieved. James Holland describes how Allied airmen were able to gain the upper hand over their enemy, and how critical bombing campaigns destroyed the German ability to defend Fortress Europe

On Monday, 22 May 1944, 16 P-47 Thunderbolt fighter planes of the 61st Fighter Squadron were speeding towards the north German city of Bremen led by Lieutenant-Colonel Francis “Gaby” Gabreski, one of the originals of Colonel Hub Zemke’s 56th Fighter Group, and by now, among the most experienced fighter pilots in the US Eighth Air Force.

Having helped escort just under 300 B-17 Flying Fortress heavy bombers on an attack on the Baltic port of Kiel, their role now was to maraud the skies of northern Germany, shooting down any enemy planes they might see and

especially target locomotives on the ground. This intensive train-smashing operation, begun the previous day, had been given the codename Chattanooga Choo Choo, after the famous song. A jaunty and jolly jingle it might have been, but the business of shooting up locomotives was a deadly serious one. The German railway network, the Reichsbahn, really was the glue that kept the German war effort together. Almost everything travelled the shrinking Reich by rail: raw materials, weapons, labour, troops, food, Jews being sent to death camps.

The more marshalling yards that were smashed, the more locomotives shot up, the more railway bridges destroyed and lines cut, the

harder it would be for the Germans to move and reinforce the battlefield once the invasion began.

Gabreski’s squadron of 16 was around 20 miles east of the city when a couple of locomotives were spotted. With their clouds of white steam they were easy enough to spot on a lovely clear day in May. The squadron had barely begun circling when Gabreski spotted a not very well camouflaged air base below. Gabreski felt the now familiar surge of excitement as he led the squadron down to attack. The Thunderbolt was a big fighter that was unrivalled in a dive. Armed with .50 calibre machine-guns it could pack a big punch, take a lot of punishment itself and was

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American planes conducting recon sorties over Normandy, France, in preparation for the Normandy invasion

P-51 Mustangs flying to German targets

Portrait of American Lieutenant Colonel Francis S. Gabreski as he sits in cockpit of his P-47 Thunderbolt

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highly manoeuvrable too. More to the point, by May 1944, American fighter pilots were in a different league to those in the Luftwaffe in terms of flying skill. Most new pilots joined their squadrons with more than three times the flying hours of a German fighter pilot and because of the plentiful amounts of fuel and the large pilot overlap in each squadron – usually over 50 to keep 16 planes flying per mission – there was a lot of time to then further practice and hone skills with those who had more experience. Because of the chronic shortages of fuel, new Luftwaffe fighter pilots tended to fly on missions only. Most were promptly shot down.

That was about to be the fate of a number of FW 190s now. As Gabreski and his men hurtled towards them, he saw around 16 of them spread out in line abreast. The enemy fighters were now at a height where they could have turned and fought, but they seemed oblivious to what was happening and instead flew on in steady formation, presenting themselves as juicy targets for the P-47s.

Picking out one, Gabreski opened fire and saw his bullets flash all over the German's fuselage and wing. It turned and fell away then burst into flames.

Now Gabreski got behind a second and closing in opened fire a second time. This time the canopy flew off and moments later, the pilot bailed out. So that was two. Soon after, he had a third.

In all, Gabreski and his men shot down 13 confirmed, one probable and two damaged that day for the loss of two of their own, his squadron demonstrating the dominance the American day fighters had over the Luftwaffe in the west. Just over two weeks before the invasion, that was good news. Just as good was the other hunting that day by Zemke's fighter group: six locomotives destroyed, seven damaged, as well as 18 river barges shot up. Chatanooga Choo Choo was going well.

There was further cause for cheer just under a week later on Sunday 28 May, a day that saw the culmination of what was in effect a five-month battle in the skies for air superiority over northwest Europe. Some 78 German fighters were shot out of the sky that day, the closest of which was more than 500 miles from the planned invasion front. The Luftwaffe might not have been destroyed, but they'd been pushed back deep into Germany, giving the Allies virtual free-reign over all of France and northwest Europe – one of the non-negotiable pre-conditions for the invasion that had been uppermost in the Allied war leaders' minds since the previous summer.

Materiel superiority

Air power had always been absolutely central to Britain and America's war strategy and particularly so with the planned Operation Overlord, the invasion of Normandy. The Allies

were fighting big war – industry, technologically and mechanically heavy in which 'steel not flesh' was the mantra. Broadly speaking, it was a very effective strategy too and one in which the number of men fighting at the coal face of war was kept to minimum. It still meant sending far too many young men into the firing line but nothing like as many as those of the other major combatant nations in the war.

It was also recognised, however, that a cross-channel invasion of Normandy was inconceivable unless the Allies had air superiority and not just over the invasion beaches but over much of France and northwest Europe.

This was because although the Allies had significantly greater materiel superiority over the Germans, they only had the shipping to bring over a fraction of those men, guns and tanks and all that was needed for fighting a sustained battle in one go. Yet the moment they landed, the race would be on to see which side could bring to bear the most – and decisive number – of forces into the bridgehead. Air power was to make up for the shortfall in shipping by slowing German reinforcements reaching the front. Since the Reichbahn kept Germany fighting and was the prime means of moving men and materiel any distances, the more railway marshalling yards, locomotives, rolling stock and bridges that could be destroyed before the invasion, the

A US Air Force B-17 Flying Fortress that joined in the invasion air fleet of June 6, 1944



better. Once the Allies had made a successful lodgement and won the race for the build-up of troops, they would be sure to win the battle for Normandy – and then the rest of France and western Europe.

Successfully hitting these targets, however, was dependent on securing air superiority first. Smaller targets, such as bridges, railways and locomotives could only be effectively hit by attacking at low altitudes and with a combination of twin-engine medium bombers and single-engine fighter-bombers. These in turn could only operate successfully if the skies above them were clear of enemy fighters, although the efficiency of the heavies, operating at higher altitudes, was also far greater when largely clear of marauding Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs. In fact, anti-aircraft guns had only a 0.002 per cent chance of hitting a target. It was estimated that it took 5,000 light flak shells and 3,500 heavy anti-aircraft rounds to shoot down a single Allied bomber. Unquestionably, the biggest threat to Allied bombers was enemy fighter aircraft.

The Allies had formally agreed that destroying the Luftwaffe should be their number one strategic air aim the previous June 1943. Operation Pointblank directed Allied air forces to destroy the German aircraft industry by heavy bombing and by shooting down enemy fighters. Unfortunately for both the American daylight and British night time bombing

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campaigns most German aircraft factories and assembly plants were deep in the Reich beyond fighter protection and Pointblank coincided with a complete overhaul of the German air defence system as well as markedly increased production figures for fighter aircraft. Something near panic befell the Allied air commanders in the autumn of 1943 as bombers were being shot down in droves with no sign of clearing the skies. The clock was ticking irrevocably towards D-Day but a concentrated air assault in the third week of February, known as Big Week, combined with the arrival of the superb long-range P-51 Mustang fighters in growing numbers, ensured that the necessary air

superiority had been gained by early April 1944. And although the German aircraft industry was still churning out Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs, the number of experienced pilots was being increasingly whittled away while new boys had become lambs to the slaughter.

With air superiority secured, the Supreme Allied Commander for Overlord, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, was able to take overall command of the air forces and directed them to carry about first the Transportation Plan, targeting bridges, marshalling yards and the German communications network, as well as the Oil Plan, in which the heavies of the Allied strategic air forces would strike at oil and synthetic fuel plants. Much of the Transportation Plan, however, would be focused on France as well as marshalling yards in western Germany, and there were major concerns about civilian loss of life.

“Considering that they are all our friends,” Churchill wrote to Eisenhower on 3 April, “this might be held to be an act of very great severity, bringing much hatred on the Allied Air Forces.” After discussions with Tedder, Eisenhower replied two days later, pointing out that one of the prime factors in the decision to launch the invasion was the use of overwhelming air power. “I and my military advisors have become convinced that the bombing of these centers will increase our chances for success in the critical battle,” he

US Air Force P-47 Thunderbolts flying over Omaha beach during the invasion of Normandy, 6 June 1944. Watercolour by Ogden Pleissner



wrote and added that he believed estimates of civilian casualties, some as high as 160,000, had been massively exaggerated – as was to prove the case. “The French people are now slaves,” he told Churchill. “Only a successful Overlord can free them. No one has a greater stake in the success of that operation than have the French.” Everything would be done to avoid loss of life, but he felt very strongly that it would be “sheer folly” to overlook any operation that would dramatically improve the chances of success of the invasion.

At the beginning of April 1944, despite the huge material superiority of the Allies, the cross-channel invasion, all the way from southern England to Normandy, still looked an immensely difficult and fraught operation indeed. For Eisenhower, as Supreme Allied Commander, the most senior military officer for the entire operation, Overlord was in no regard a foregone conclusion. It is difficult to imagine the oppressive burden of responsibility resting on his shoulders.

While Spaatz sent his heavies in Italy to bomb the oilfields at Ploesti in Romania, bombers from the Eighth and Bomber Command struck at marshalling yards and even bridges over the Seine and Meuse rivers. At the same time, bombers and fighters from the tactical air forces continued to destroy further

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bridges, railway lines and any sign of enemy movement all across France and the Low Countries. Any targets across this large swathe of western Europe were potentially helpful to Overlord while at the same time contributing to keeping the enemy guessing as to where the invasion would actually come. So it had gone on, night after night, day after day. Also hit were gun emplacements and radar stations all along the Atlantic Wall.

In 1940, the Luftwaffe had failed to heavily target Britain’s radar chain and had paid the price. In 1944, the Allies were making no such mistakes. Rocket-firing Hawker Typhoons of the RAF’s 2nd Tactical Air Force were particularly effective at this. By the beginning of June, 76 of the 94 radar stations along the French coast had been knocked out completely and the effectiveness of the German radar chain

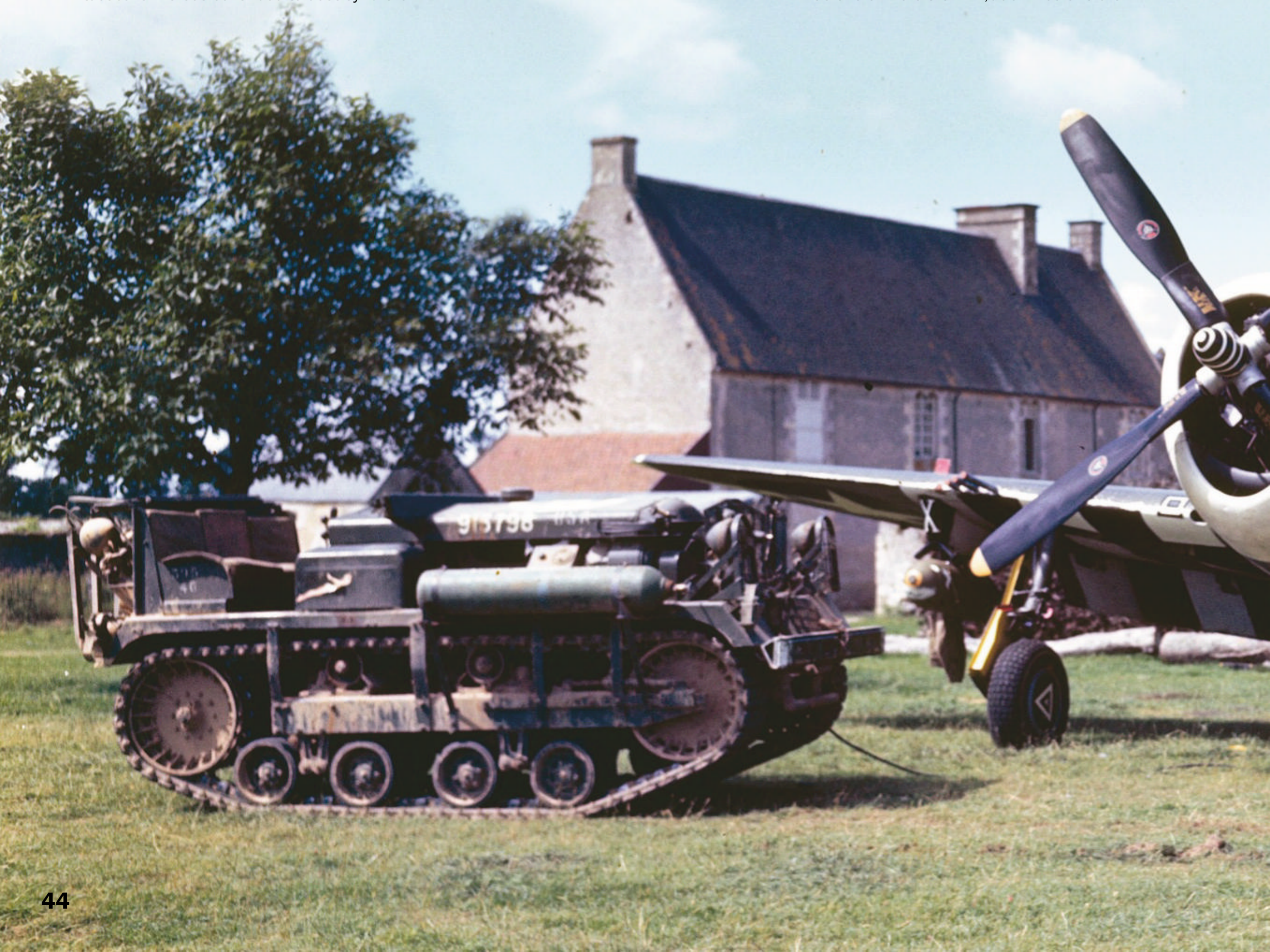
reduced to just five per cent efficiency. It was a vital part in ensuring the time and location of the invasion remained secret to the last.

In all, over the nine weeks leading up to D-Day, the Allied air forces dropped some 197,000 tons of bombs on France alone. To put this in perspective, during the entire Blitz between September 1940 and May 1941, the Luftwaffe dropped just 18,000 tons of bombs on London.

Readying for D-Day

At around 12.30am on 6 June 1944, the B-17 Flying Fortress crews of the 91st Bomb Group at Bassingbourn were being woken and told to get ready for a mission. “Maybe this is D-Day,” said Lieutenant Bert Stiles to his fellow officers in his Quonset hut, as they all grumbled and reluctantly pulled themselves out of bed. No-one laughed or even replied. It had been said so often over the past few weeks they’d all given up on the big day ever arriving. But it was finally the day. At breakfast in the mess hall, they were told they would be shortly heading to Normandy. “D-Day,” Stiles muttered. “Honest to God.”

Elsewhere in England, airfields were getting ready for the invasion. Stiles and his crew would be flying their heavy four-engine bomber as one of more than 12,000 Allied aircraft



operating on D-Day. Back in the summer of 1940, the Luftwaffe had rarely sent over more than a few hundred aircraft to assault Britain. Among the Allied air forces were transport fleets delivering three divisions of US, British and Canadian airborne troops, as well as heavy bombers from the US Eighth Air Force and RAF Bomber Command, medium bombers of the US Ninth Air Force and the RAF's 2nd Tactical Air Force, as well as thousands of fighters. The bombers would play an important role in hitting coastal defences, while the fighters would provide top cover protection and maraud inland. Many flew multiple times – Gaby Gabreski flew three trips, for example. Barely a Luftwaffe aircraft was to be seen, the Allies were certainly masters of the skies on D-Day.

In the run up to D-Day, Allied air forces had to strike far and wide in order to keep the Germans guessing about where exactly the invasion would come. Now, though, the cat was out of the bag, and so they could focus their efforts on the bridgehead and on making the movement of German reinforcements to the front as fraught as possible.

In the days that followed, it was the Allied air forces that ensured the Allies won the race for the build-up of the bridgehead. German units quickly discovered they could no longer safely move a muscle by daylight. General Erich

Marcks, the highly experienced commander of the German LXXXIV Corps, was killed when his car was shot up by Spitfires. The HQ of Panzergruppe West was also discovered and bombed, killing a number of senior staff officers, while the lives of the panzer divisions moving up to the Normandy front was also made a misery. Later, on 17 July, Rommel himself would be critically wounded by Spitfires while speeding in daylight in his staff car. The Panzer Lehr, arguably the best trained and equipped division in the Wehrmacht, was harried all the way from Le Mans. "The section between Caumont and Villers-Canivet Bocage," said Captain Alexander Hartdegen, "was the road of death. Sitting along the road were burnt-out track and bombed field kitchens and gun tractors, some still smouldering, the dead lying beside them. This horrible scene was the backdrop to our journey."

Read any letters, diaries or memoirs of German veterans, and the threat and fear of the dreaded Jabos – Allied fighter bombers – is a constant theme and one that ground down morale and severely hampered their freedom to move, and with it, their ability to fight effectively. Only poor weather saved them, but that then brought its own miseries. German tank crews were trained to be mobile but now found themselves camouflaged in

woods or amidst hedgerows during the day, barely daring to move. "This was a never-before experienced extremely difficult burden," noted Obersturmführer Hans Siegel of the 12 SS Panzer Division. "Always on the look-out, not speaking to anyone. The crews were isolated, not knowing what was happening elsewhere."

By Thursday, 15 June 1944, five airfields had been built in Normandy and in the next five days a further seven would follow. It was, by any reckoning, an astonishing achievement of organisation and engineering; the very first had been all but finished on 7 June behind Omaha Beach. Squadron Leader Tom Neil, a Battle of Britain veteran and attached to the Ninth Air Force had landed in his Mustang that evening. More airfields were being hastily cleared, graded and laid with pierce-steel-plating by the day, which meant ever more numbers of fighter-bombers could avoid flying back to England and so spend more time over the battle area.

Heavy strategic bombers continued to be used as well. Such forces were not designed to directly support ground operations and it did not always work well. The medieval city of Caen, for example, was largely destroyed by Bomber Command for little obvious benefit. On the other hand, when over 2,000 bombers pummelled German positions at the start of the British Operation Goodwood, their concentrated bomb

An American P-47 Thunderbolt receives some maintenance at a makeshift airfield in the French countryside



Lieutenant Q Aanenson inspects the damaged undercarriage of his P-47 Thunderbolt after being hit by flak

patterns hit the enemy positions hard. They did again at the start of the American Operation Cobra, on 25 July, even though a number of bombs fell on their own lines. This time, 1,800 heavies, 300 medium bombers and 350 fighters saturated a concentrated area of three-and-a-half by one-and-a-half miles with a phenomenal 72,000 100-pound bombs, which caused enough damage to kill and maim but not turn the land into an impassable moonscape.

The effect was terrible – 100 per cent casualties to those troops underneath. Those not killed were sent insane while many died due to the immense concussive effect. It was also an attack that finally opened the floodgates of the German defences – defences that had been gradually but effectively chewed up and ground down since D-Day. Suddenly, the Germans were forced to pull back in a hurry and that meant risking open roads in daylight hours. This put them at the mercy of the dreaded Jabos. In the American half of the battlefield, a new tactical development was also just being put into practice. This was the Armored Column Cover, devised by Brigadier-General “Pete” Quesada, commander of IX Tactical Command, and which involved placing a pilot in a lead tank with direct VHF radio contact with standing patrols of fighter bombers above and ensured the columns on the ground were now in constant communication with the fighters above. It

helped prevent friendly fire incidents and meant those on the ground were now given advance warning of enemy positions below.

The fleeing Germans were repeatedly hammered. Between the villages of Roncey and St Denis-le-Gast, for example, a three-mile German column was caught by fighters and totally destroyed. In all 100 tanks, 250 vehicles and a mass of horse-drawn carts and wagons were annihilated.

In many ways, Allied air power came to be the defining feature of this final phase of the Normandy campaign. Despite their increasingly desperate situation, the German armies in Normandy were ordered by Hitler to mount a counter-attack across the American advance. Operation Lüttich launched on 7 August and although the town of Mortain was briefly overrun, the attack soon stalled and not least because of Allied air power. Hitler had promised the support of 1,000 Luftwaffe aircraft but although a number did take off, most were pounced upon as soon as they were airborne; not a single one reached the battlefield, while Jabos pounded the attackers, exposed as they were out in the open and in bright August sunshine. “The absolute air supremacy of the Allies,” noted General Freiherr von Gersdorff, “made any further movement by the attack units impossible.”

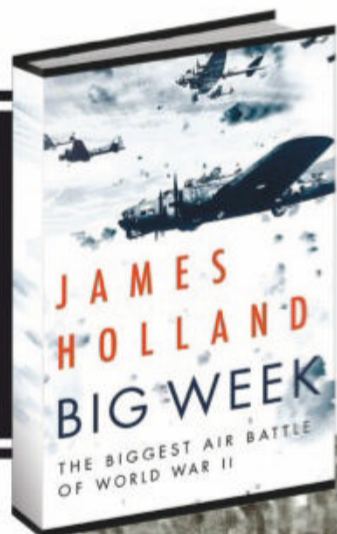
Lüttich was the Germans’ last gasp in Normandy as their forces now succumbed to

the weight of Allied forces virtually all around them. As they turned eastwards in full retreat, desperate to escape complete encirclement, the Falaise Pocket, as it became known, became yet another killing zone. Canalised into a handful of narrow roads and lanes that crossed the narrow River Dives, they were trapped nose-to-tail at the mercy of Allied artillery but especially air power.

On 22 August, with the Normandy battle finally handing the Allies a massive victory, Flight Sergeant Ken Adam, a Typhoon pilot in the RAF’s 609 Squadron, drove down to see the carnage for himself; he had been among the pilots relentlessly pounding the escaping Germans. He was also a German Jew who had escaped Berlin before the war. The road leading from the Dives valley – or what was left of it – was choked with wreckage, swollen corpses and dead cattle and horses. “The smell was terrible,” he recalled. “This was my first contact on the ground with the dead and what had been the enemy.” Truly, the carnage was appalling. Of some 2,500 German armoured fighting vehicles in Normandy, barely two dozen escaped the mayhem, alongside a mere 50,000 men from two whole armies. It had been an extraordinary victory for the Allies, one in which air power had played a critical part – before, during the invasion itself, and in the final breakout and crushing of the enemy.

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James Holland is an author and broadcaster. His latest book, *Big Week*, on the Allied air campaign in the build up to D-Day, is available now from Bantam Press.



A Republic P-47 crashed on the beach in Normandy, France

Images: Alamy, Getty

